

OLD MR. TREDGOLD

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BY

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OLD MR. TREDGOLD.

CHAPTER I.

THEY were not exactly of that conventional type which used to be common whenever two sisters had to be described—the one dark and the other fair, the one sunny and amiable, the other reserved and proud; the one gay, the other melancholy, or at least very serious by nature. They were not at all like Minna and Brenda in the ‘*Pirate*,’ which used to be a contrast dear to the imagination. But yet there was a very distinct difference between them. Katherine was a little taller, a little bigger, a little darker, than Stella. She was three years older but was supposed to look ten. She was not so lively in her movements either of mind or person, and she was supposed to be slow. The one who was all light threw a shadow—which seems contradictory—on the other. They were the two daughters of an old gentleman who had been that mysterious being called a City man in his time. Not that there was anything at all mysterious about old Mr. Tredgold; his daughters and his daughters’ friends were fond of saying that he had come to London with the traditionary half-crown in his pocket; but this was, as in so many cases, fabulous. Mr. Tredgold having in fact come of a perfectly creditable Eastern Counties family, his father being a well-to-do linen draper in Ipswich, whose pride it was to have set forth all his boys comfortably, and done everything for them that a father could do. But perhaps it is easier to own to that half-crown and the myth of an origin sudden and commercially-romantic without

antecedents, than to a respectable shop in a respectable town, with a number of relatives installed in other shops, doing well and ready to claim the rights of relationship at inconvenient moments. I do not know at all how fortunes are made "in the City." If you dig coals out of the bowels of the earth, or manufacture anything, from cotton to ships, by which money is made, that is a process which comes within the comprehension of the most limited faculties; but making money in the City never seems to mean anything so simple. It means handing about money, or goods which other people have produced, to other third or fourth people, and then handing them back again even to the Scriptural limits of seventy times seven; which is why it appears so mysterious to the simple-minded.

But, indeed, if anybody had investigated the matter, Mr. Tredgold's progress had been quite easy to follow, at least in the results. He had gone from a house in Hampstead to a house in Kensington, and thence to Belgravia, changing also his summer residences from Herne Bay to Hastings, and thence to the wilds of Surrey, and then to the Isle of Wight, where, having retired from the cares of business, he now lived in one of those beautiful places, with one of the most beautiful prospects in the world before him, which so often fall to the lot of persons who care very little about beauty in any shape. The house stood on a cliff which was almost a little headland, standing out from the line of the downs between two of the little towns on the south side of that favoured island. The grounds were laid out quite regardless of expense, so much so that they were a show in the district, and tourists were admitted by the gardeners when the family was absent, to see such a collection of flowering shrubs and rare trees as was not to be found between that point, let us say, and Mr. Hanbury's gardens at Mortola. The sunny platform of the cliff thus adorned to the very edge of the precipice was the most delightful mount of vision, from which you could look along the lovely coast at that spot not much inferior to the Riviera, with its line of sunny towns and villages lying along the course of the bay on one hand, and the darker cliffs clad with wood,

amid all the picturesque broken ground of the Landslip on the other ; and the dazzling sea, with the additional glory of passing ships giving it a continual interest, stretching out far into the distance, where it met the circle of the globe, and merged as all life does in the indefinite Heaven beyond—the Heaven, the Hades, the unknown—not always celestial, sometimes dark with storm or wild with wind, a vague and indeterminate distance from which the tempests and all their demons, as well as the angels, come, yet the only thing that gives even a wistful satisfaction to the eyes of those who sway with every movement of this swaying globe in the undiscovered depths of air and sky.

Very little attention, I am sorry to say, was paid to this beautiful landscape by the family who had secured it for their special delectation. The girls would take their visitors "to see the view," who cast a careless glance at it, and said, "How pretty!" and returned with pleasure to the tennis or croquet, or even tea of the moment. Mr. Tredgold, for his part, had chosen a room for himself on the sheltered side of the house, as was perhaps natural, and shivered at the thought of the view. There was always a wind that cut you to pieces, he said, on that side of the cliff; and, truth to tell, I believe there was, the proverbial softness of the climate of the Isle of Wight being a fond delusion, for the most part, in the minds of its inhabitants. Katherine was the only one who lingered occasionally over the great panorama of the sea and coast; but I think it was when she felt herself a little "out of it," as people say, when Stella was appropriating everything, and all the guests and all the lovers were circling round that little luminary, and the elder sister was not wanted anywhere—except to fill out tea perhaps, or look after the comforts of the others, which is a *rôle* that may suit a staid person of forty, but at twenty-three is not only melancholy but bewildering—it being always so difficult to see why another should have all the good things, and yourself all the crosses of life.

In the circumstances of these two girls there was not even that cheap way of relief which ends in blaming some one.

Even Providence could not be blamed. Katherine, if you looked at her calmly, was quite as pretty as Stella; she had a great deal more in her; she was more faithful, more genuine and trustworthy; she played tennis as well or better; she had as good a voice and a better ear; in short, it was quite incomprehensible to any one why it was that Stella was the universal favourite and her sister was left in the shade. But so it was. Katherine made up the set with the worst players, or she was kept at the tea-table while the merriest game was going on. She had the reversion of Stella's partners, who talked to her of her sister, of what a jolly girl, or what an incipient angel she was, according to their several modes of speech. The old ladies said that it was because Katherine was so unselfish; but I should not like to brand a girl for whom I have a great regard with that conventional title. She was not, to her own consciousness, unselfish at all. She would have liked very much, if not to have the first place, at least to share it, to have a retinue of her own, and champions and admirers as well as Stella. She did not like the secondary position nor even consent to it with any willingness; and the consequence was that occasionally she retired and looked at the view with anything but happy feelings; so that the appreciation of Nature, and of their good fortune in having their lines thrown in such pleasant places, was very small and scant indeed in this family, which outsiders were sometimes disposed to envy for the beauty of their surroundings and for their wonderful view.

The house which occupied this beautiful situation was set well back in the grounds, so that it at least should not be contaminated by the view, and it was an odd fantastic house, though by no means uncomfortable when you got into the ways of it. A guest, unacquainted with these ways, which consisted of all the very last so-called improvements, might indeed spend a wretched day or night in his or her ignorance. I have indeed known one who, on a very warm evening, found herself in a chamber hermetically sealed to all appearance, with labels upon the windows bearing the words

"Close" and "Open," but affording no information as to how to work or move the complicated machinery which achieved these operations; and when she turned to the bell for aid, there was a long cord depending by the wall, at which she tugged and tugged in vain, not knowing (for these were the early days of electrical appliances) that all she had to do was to touch the little ivory circle at the end of the cord. The result was a night's imprisonment in what gradually became a sort of Black Hole of Calcutta, without air to breathe or means of appealing to the outside world. The Tredgolds themselves, however, I am happy to say, had the sense in their own rooms to have the windows free to open and shut according to the rules of Nature.

The whole place was very elaborately furnished, with an amount of gilding and ornament calculated to dazzle the beholder—inlaid cabinets, carved furniture, and rich hangings everywhere, not a door without a *portière*, not a window without the most elaborate sets of curtains. The girls had not been old enough to control this splendour when it was brought into being by an adroit upholsterer; and, indeed, they were scarcely old enough even yet to have escaped from the spell of the awe and admiration into which they had been trained. They felt the flimsiness of the fashionable mode inspired by Liberty in comparison with their solid and costly things, even should these be in worst taste, and, as in everything a sense of superiority is sweet, they did not attempt any innovations. But the room in which they sat together in the evening was at least the most simply decorated in the house. There was less gold, there were some smooth and simple tables on which the hand could rest without carrying away a sharp impression of carved foliage or arabesques. There were no china vases standing six feet high, and there was a good deal of litter about such as is indispensable to the happiness of girls. Mr. Tredgold had a huge easy-chair placed near to a tall lamp, and the evening paper, only a few hours later than if he had been in London, in his hands. He was a little old man with no appearance to speak of—no features, no hair, and very

little in the way of eyes. How he had managed to be the father of two vigorous young women nobody could understand; but vigorous young women are, however it has come about, one of the commonest productions of the age, a fashion like any other. Stella lay back in a deep chair near her father, and was at this moment, while he filled the air of the room with the crinkling of his paper as he folded back a leaf, lost in the utterance of a long yawn which opened her mouth to a preternatural size, and put her face, which was almost in a horizontal position thrown back and contemplating the ceiling, completely out of drawing, which was a pity, for it was a pretty face. Katherine showed no inclination to yawn—she was busy at a table doing something—something very useless and of the nature of trumpery I have no doubt; but it kept her from yawning at least.

"Well, my pet," Mr. Tredgold said, patting his hand on the arm of Stella's chair, "very tired, eh—tired of having nothing to do, and sitting with your old father one night?"

"Oh, I've got plenty to do," said Stella, getting over the yawn, and smiling blandly upon the world; "and, as for one night I sit with you for ever, you ungrateful old dad."

"What is in the wind now? What's the next entertainment? You never mean to be quiet for two days together?" the old gentleman said.

"It is not our fault," said Katherine. "The Courtnays have gone away, the Allens are going, and Lady Jane has not yet come back."

"I declare," cried Stella, "it's humiliating that we should have to depend on anybody for company, whether they are summer people or winter people. What is Lady Jane to us? We are as good as any of them. It is you who give in directly, Kate, and think there is nothing to be done. I'll have a picnic to-morrow, if it was only the people from the hotel; they are better than nobody, and so pleased to be asked. I shan't spend another evening alone with papa."

Papa was not displeased by this sally. He laughed and chuckled in his throat, and crinkled his newspaper more than

ever. "What a little hussy!" he cried. "Did you ever know such a little hussy, Kate?"

Kate did not pay any attention at all to papa. She went on with her gum and scissors and her trumpery, which was intended for a bazaar somewhere. "The question is, Do you know the hotel people?" she said. "You would not think a picnic of five or six much fun?"

"Oh, five or six!" cried the other with a toss of her head; and she sprang up from her chair with an activity as great as her former listlessness, and rushed to a very fine ormolu table all rose colour and gold, at which she sat down, dashing off as many notes. "The Setons at the hotel will bring as many as that; they have officers and all kinds of people about," she cried, flinging the words across her shoulder as she wrote.

"But we scarcely know them, Stella; and Mrs. Seton I don't like," said Katherine, with her gum-brush arrested in her hand.

"Papa, am I to ask the people I want, or is Kate to dictate in everything?" cried Stella, putting up another note.

"Let the child have her way, Katie, my dear! you know she has always had her way all her life."

Katherine's countenance was perhaps not so amiable as Stella's, who was radiant with fun and expectation and contradiction. "I think I may sometimes have my way too," she said. "They are not nice people; they may bring any kind of man, there is always a crowd of men about *her*. Papa, I think we are much safer, two girls like us, and you never going out with us, if we keep to people we know; that was always to be the condition when you consented that Stella should send our invitations without consulting you."

"Yes, yes, my dear," said the old gentleman, turning to his elder daughter, "that is quite true, quite true;" then he caught Stella's eye, and added tremulously: "You must certainly have two or three people you know."

"And what do you call Miss Mildmay?" cried Stella, "and Mrs. Shanks?—aren't they people we know?"

"Oh, if she is asking them—the most excellent people and

knowing everybody—I think—don't you think, Katie?—that might do?"

"Of course it will do," cried Stella gaily. "And old Shanks and old Mildmay are such fun; they always fight—and they hate all the people in the hotels; and only think of their two old faces when they see Mrs. Seton and all her men! It will be the best party we have had this whole year."

Katherine's ineffectual remonstrances were drowned in the tinkling as of a cracked bottle of Mr. Tredgold's laugh. He liked to hear the old ladies called old cats and set to fight and spit at each other. It gave him an agreeable sense of contrast with his own happy conditions; petted and appealed to by the triumphant youth which belonged to him, and of which he was so proud. The inferiority of the "old things" was pleasant to the old man, who was older than they. The cackle of his laugh swept every objection away. And then I think Katherine would have liked to steal away outside and look at the view, and console herself with the sight of the Sliptin lights and all the twinkling villages along the coast; which, it will be seen, was no disinterested devotion to Nature, but only a result of the sensation of being out of it, and not having, which Stella had, her own way.

"Well, you needn't come unless you like," cried Stella with defiance, as they parted at the door between their respective rooms—a door which Katherine, I confess, shut with some energy on this particular evening, though it generally stood open night and day.

"I don't think I will," Katherine cried in her impatience; but she thought better of this before day.

CHAPTER II.

STELLA had always been the spoilt child of the Tredgold family. Her little selfishnesses and passions of desire to have her own way, and everything she might happen to want, had been so amusing that nobody had chidden or thought for a moment (as everybody thought with Katherine) of the bad effect upon her character and temper of having all these passions satisfied and getting everything she stormed or cried for. Aunt after aunt had passed in shadow, as it were, across the highly lighted circle of Mr. Tredgold's home life, all of them breaking down at last in the impossibility of keeping pace with Stella, or satisfying her impetuous little spirit; and governess after governess in the same way had performed a sort of processional march through the house. Stella's perpetual flow of mockery and mimicry had all the time kept her father in endless amusement. The mockery was not very clever, but he was easily pleased and thought it capital fun. There was so much inhumanity in his constitution, though he was a kind man in his way and very indulgent to those who belonged to him, that he had no objection to see his own old sister (though a good creature) outrageously mimicked in all her peculiarities, much less the sisters of his late wife. Little Stella, while still under the age of sixteen, had driven off all these ladies and kept her father in constant amusement. "The little hussy!" he said, "the little vixen!" and chuckled and laughed till it was feared he might choke some time, being afflicted with bronchitis, in those convulsions of delight. Katherine, who was the champion of the aunts, and wept as one after the other departed, amused him greatly too. "She is an old maid born!" he said, "and she sticks up for her

kind, but Stella will have her pick, and marry a prince, and take off the old cats as long as she lives."

"But if she lives," said a severe governess who for some time kept the household in awe, "she will become old too, and probably be an old cat in the opinion of those that come after her."

"No fear," cried the foolish old man—"no fear." In his opinion Stella would never be anything but pretty and young, and radiant with fun and fascination.

And since the period when the girls "came out" there had been nothing but a whirl of gaiety in the house. They did not come out in the legitimate way, by being presented to Her Majesty and thus placed on the roll of society in the usual meaning of the word, but only by appearing at the first important ball in the locality, and giving it so to be understood that they were prepared to accept any invitations that might come in their way. They had come out together, Stella being much too masterful and impatient to permit any such step on Katherine's part without her, so that Katherine had been more than nineteen while Stella was not much over sixteen when this important step took place. Three years had passed since that time. Stella was twenty, and beginning to feel like a rather *blasé* woman of the world; while Katherine at twenty-three was supposed to be stepping back to that obscurity which her father had prophesied for her, not far off from the region of the old cats to which she was supposed to belong. Curiously enough, no prince had come out of the unknown for the brighter sister. The only suitor that had appeared had been for Katherine, and had been almost laughed out of countenance, poor man, before he took his dismissal, which was, indeed, rather given by the household in general than by the person chiefly concerned. He was an Indian civilian on his way back to some blazing station on the Plains, which was reason enough why he should be repulsed by the family; but probably the annoying thought that it was Katherine he wanted and not her sister had still more to do with it.

"It was a good thing at least that he had not the audacity to ask for you, my pet," Mr. Tredgold said.

"For me!" said Stella, with a little shriek of horror, "I should very soon have given him his answer." And Katherine, too, gave him his answer, but in a dazed and bewildered way. She was not at all in love with him, but it did glance across her mind that to be the first person with some one, to have a house of her own in which she should be supreme, and a man by her side who thought there was nobody like her—— But, then, was it possible that any man should really think that? or that any house could ever have this strange fascination of home which held her fast she could not tell how or why? She acquiesced accordingly in Mr. Stanford's dismissal. But when she went out to look at the view in her moments of discouragement her mind was apt to return to him, to wonder sometimes what he was doing, where he was, or if he had found some one to be his companion, and of whom he could think that there was nobody like her in the world?

In the meantime, however, on the morning which followed the evening already recorded, Katherine had too much to do in the way of providing for the picnic to have much time to think. Stella had darted into her room half-dressed with a number of notes in her hand to tell her that everybody was coming. "Mrs. Seton brings six including her husband and herself—that makes four fresh new men besides little Seton, whom you can talk to if you like, Kate; and there's three from the Rectory, and five from the Villa, and old Mildmay and Shanks to do propriety for papa's sake."

"I wish you would not speak of them in that way by their names. It does not take much trouble to say Miss Mildmay and Mrs. Shanks."

"I'll say the old cats, if you like," Stella said with a laugh, "that's shorter still. Do stir up a little, and be quick and let us have a good lunch."

"How am I to get cold chickens at an hour's notice?" said Katherine. "You seem to think they are all ready roasted in the poultry yard, and can be put in the hampers straight off. I don't know what Mrs. Pearson will say."

"She will only say what she has said a hundred times ; but it always comes right all the same," cried Stella, retreating into her own room to complete her toilette. And this was so true that Kate finished hers also in comparative calm. She was the housekeeper *de jure*, and interviewed Mrs. Pearson every morning with the profoundest gravity as if everything depended upon her ; but at bottom Katherine knew very well that it was Mrs. Pearson who was the housekeeper *de facto*, and that she, like everyone else, managed somehow that Miss Stella should have her way.

"You know it's just impossible," said that authority a few minutes later. "Start at twelve and tell me at nine to provide for nearly twenty people ! Where am I to get the chickens, not to speak of ham and cold beef and all the rest ? Do ye think the chickens in the yard are roasted already ?" cried the indignant housekeeper, using Katherine's own argument, "and that I have only to set them out in the air to cool ?"

"You see I did not know yesterday," said the young mistress apologetically ; "it was a sudden thought of Miss Stella's last night."

"She *is* a one for sudden thoughts !" cried Pearson, half-indignant, half-admiring ; and after a little more protestation that it was impossible she began to arrange how it could be done. It was indeed so usual an experience that the protests were stereotyped, so to speak. Everything on the Cliff was sudden — even Katherine had acquired the habit, and preferred an impromptu to any careful preparation of events. "Then if anything is wrong we can say there was so very little time to do it in," she said with an instinct of recklessness foreign to her nature. But Mrs. Pearson was wise and prudent and knew her business, so that it was very seldom anything went wrong.

On ordinary occasions every one knows how rare it is to have a thoroughly fine day for the most carefully arranged picnic. The association of rain with these festivities is traditional. There is nothing that has so bad an effect upon the most settled weather. Clouds blow up upon the sky and rain

pours down at the very suggestion. But that strange Deity which we call Providence, and speak of in the neuter gender, is never more apparently capricious than in this respect. A picnic which is thoroughly undesirable, which has nothing in its favour, which brings people together who ought to be kept apart, and involves mischief of every kind, is free from all the usual mischances. That day dawned more brightly even than other days. It shone even cloudless, the glass rising, the wind dropping as if for the special enjoyment of some favourite of Heaven. It was already October, but quite warm, as warm as June, the colour of autumn adding only a charm the more, and neither chill nor cloud to dull the atmosphere. The sea shone like diamonds but more brilliant, curves upon curve of light following each other with every glittering facet in movement. The white cliff at the further point of the bay shone with a dazzling whiteness beyond comparison with anything else in sky or earth.

At twelve o'clock the sun overhead was like a benediction, not too hot as in July and August, just perfect everybody said; and the carriages and the horse, with their shiny coats, and the gay guests in every tint of colour, with convivial smiles and pleasant faces, made the drive as gay as Rotten Row when Mr. Tredgold came forth to welcome and speed forth his guests. This was his own comparison often used, though the good man had never known much of Rotten Row. He stood in the porch, which had a rustical air though the house was so far from being rustical, and surveyed all these dazzling people with pride. Though he had been used for years now to such gay assemblages, he had never ceased to feel a great pride in them as though of "an honour unto which he was not born." To see his girls holding out hospitality to all the grand folks was an unceasing satisfaction. He liked to see them at the head of everything, dispensing bounties. The objectionable lady who had brought so many men in her train did not come near Mr. Tredgold, but bowed to him from a safe distance, from his own waggonette in which she had placed herself.

"I am not going to be led like a lamb to that old bore,"

she said to her party, which swarmed about her and was ready to laugh at everything she said; and they were all much amused by the old man's bow, and by the wave of his hand, with which he seemed to make his visitors free of his luxuries.

"The old bofe thinks himself an old swell," said someone else. "Tredgold and Silverstamp, money changers," said another. "Not half so good—Tredgold and Wurst, sausage makers," cried a third. They all laughed so much, being easily satisfied in the way of wit, that Stella, who was going to drive, came up flourishing her whip, to know what was the joke.

"Oh, only about a funny sign we saw on the way," said Mrs. Seton, with a glance all round, quenching the laughter. The last thing that could have entered Stella's mind was that these guests of hers, so effusive in their acceptance of her invitation, so pleased to be there, with everything supplied for their day's pleasure, were making a jest of anything that belonged to her. She felt that she was conferring a favour upon them, giving them "a great treat," which they had no right to expect.

"You must tell me about it on the way," she said, beaming upon them with gracious looks, which was the best joke of all, they all thought, stifling their laughter.

Mr. Tredgold sent a great many wreathed smiles and gracious gestures to the waggonette which was full of such a distinguished company, and with Stella and her whip just ready to mount the driving-seat. They were new friends he was aware. The men were all fashionable, "a cut above" the Sliplin or even the smaller county people. The old gentleman loved to see his little Stella among them, with her little delightful swagger and air of being A 1 everywhere. I hope nobody will think me responsible for the words in which poor Mr. Tredgold's vulgar little thoughts expressed themselves. He did not swagger like Stella, but loved to see her swaggering. He himself would have been almost obsequious to the fine folks. He had a remnant of uneasy consciousness that he had no natural right to all this splendour, which made him

deeply delighted when people who had a right to it condescended to accept it from his hand. But he was proud too to know that Stella did not at all share this feeling, but thought herself A 1. So she was A 1; no one there was fit to hold a candle to her. So he thought, standing at his door waving his hands, and calling out congratulations on the fine day and injunctions to his guests to enjoy themselves.

"Don't spare anything—neither the horses nor the champagne; there is plenty more where these came from," he said.

Then the waggonette dashed off, leading the way; and Katherine followed in the landau with the clergyman's family from the Rectory, receiving more of Mr. Tredgold's smiles and salutations, but not so enthusiastic.

"Mind you make everybody comfortable, Kate," he cried. "Have you plenty of wraps and cushions? There's any number in the hall; and I hope your hampers are full of nice things and plenty of champagne—plenty of good champagne; that's what the ladies want to keep up their spirits. And don't be afraid of it. I have none but the best in my house."

The vehicle which came after the landau was something of the shandrydan order, with one humble horse and five people clustering upon it.

"Why didn't you have one of our carriages!" he cried. "There's a many in the stables that we never use. You had only to say the word, and the other waggonette would have been ready for you; far more comfortable than that old rattle-trap. And, bless us! here is the midge—the midge, I declare—with the two old — with two old friends; but, dear me, Mrs. Shanks, how much better you would have been in the brougham!"

"So I said," said one of the ladies; "but Ruth Mildmay would not hear of it. She is all for independence and our own trap, but I like comfort best."

"No," said Miss Mildmay. "Indebted to our good friend we'll always be for many a nice party, and good dinner and good wine as well; but my carriage must be my own, if it's

only a hired one ; that is my opinion, Mr. Tredgold, whatever any one may say."

"My dear good ladies," said Mr. Tredgold, "this is Liberty Hall ; you may come as you please and do as you please ; only you know there's heaps of horses in my stables, and when my daughters go out I like everything about them to be nice—nice horses, nice carriages. And why should you pay for a shabby affair that anybody can hire, when you might have my brougham with all the last improvements ? But ladies will have their little whims and fads, we all know that."

"Mr. Perkins," cried Miss Mildmay out of the window to the driver of the fly, "go on ! We'll never make up to the others if you don't drive fast ; and the midge is not very safe when it goes along a heavy road."

"As safe as a coach, and we're in very good time, Miss," said Mr. Perkins, waving his whip. Perkins felt himself to be of the party too, as indeed he was of most parties along the half circle of the bay.

"Ah, I told you," cried Mr. Tredgold, with his chuckle, "you'd have been much better in the brougham." He went on chuckling after this last detachment had driven unsteadily away. A midge is not a graceful nor perhaps a very safe vehicle. It is like a section of an omnibus, a square box on wheels wanting proportions, and I think it is used only by elderly ladies at seaside places. As it jogged forth Mr. Tredgold chuckled more and more. Though he had been so lavish in his offers of the brougham, the old gentleman was not displeased to see his old neighbours roll and shamble along in that uncomfortable way. It served them right for rejecting the luxury he had provided. It served them still more right for being poor. And yet there was this advantage in their being poor, that it threw up the fact of his own wealth, like a bright object on a dark background. He went back to his room after a while, casting a glance and a shiver at the garden blazing with sunshine and flowers which crowned the cliff. He knew there was always a little shrewd breeze blowing round the corner somewhere, and the view might be hanged for anything he

cared. He went indoors to his room, where there was a nice little bit of fire. There was generally a little bit of fire somewhere wherever he was. It was much more concentrated than the sun, and could be controlled at his pleasure and suited him better. The sun shone when it pleased, but the fire burned when Mr. Tredgold pleased. He sat down and stretched himself out in his easy-chair and thought for a minute or two how excellent it was to have such a plenty of money, so many horses and carriages, and one of the nicest houses in the island—the very nicest he thought—and to give Stella everything she wanted. “She makes a fool of me,” he said to himself, chuckling. “If that little girl wanted the Koh-i-Noor, I’d be game to send off somebody careering over the earth to find out as good.” This was all for love of Stella and a little for glory of himself; and in this mood he took up his morning paper, which was his occupation for the day.

CHAPTER III.

A picnic is a very doubtful pleasure to people out of their teens, or at least out of their twenties; and yet it remains a very popular amusement. The grass is often damp, and it is a very forced and uncomfortable position to sit with your plate on your knees and nothing within your reach which you may reasonably want in the course of the awkward meal. Mrs. Seton and the younger ladies, who were sedulously attended upon, did not perhaps feel this so much; but then smart young men, especially when themselves guests and attached to one particular party, do not wait upon "the old cats" as they do upon the ladies of the feast. Why Mrs. Shanks and Miss Mildmay should have continued to partake in these banquets, and spend their money on the midget to convey them there, I am unable so much as to guess, for they would certainly have been much more comfortable at home. But they did do so, in defiance of any persuasion. They were not entirely ignorant that they were considered old cats. The jibes which were current on the subject did not always fly over their heads. They knew more or less why they were asked, and how little any one cared for their presence. And yet they went to every entertainment of the kind to which they were asked with a steadiness worthy of a better cause. They were less considered even than usual in this company, which was chiefly made up of strangers. They had to scramble for the salad and help themselves to the ham. Cold chicken was supposed to be quite enough for them without any accompaniment. The *pâté de foie gras* was quite exhausted before it came their length, and Miss Mildmay had to pluck at Mr. Seton's coat and call his attention half a dozen times before they got any cham-

pagne; and yet they were always ready to accept the most careless invitation, I cannot tell why. They talked chiefly to each other, and took their little walks together when the young ones dispersed or betook themselves to some foolish game. "Oh, here are the old cats!" they could almost hear the girls say, when the two ancient figures came in sight at the turn of the path; and Stella would turn round and walk off in the opposite direction without an attempt at concealment. But they did not take offence, and next time were always ready to come again.

That Mrs. Seton should have been ready to come was less wonderful, for though she was old enough to be a little afraid of her complexion, and was aware that damp was very bad for her neuralgia, it was indispensable for her to have something to do, and the heavy blank of a day without entertainment was dreadful to bear. And this was not for herself only but for her court, or her tail, or whatever it may be called—the retinue of young men whom she led about, and who had to be amused whatever happened. Think of the expenditure of energy that is necessary to amuse so many young active human creatures in a sitting-room in a hotel for a whole morning, before lunch comes to relieve the intolerable strain; or even in an afternoon before and after the blessed relief of tea! They sprawl about upon the chairs, they block up the windows, they gape for something to do, they expect to have funny things said to them and to be made to laugh. What hard work for any woman whose whole faculty consists in a capacity for saying every folly that comes into her head with an audacity which is not accompanied by wit! "What a fool you do look, Algy, with your mouth open like a little chick in a nest! Do you expect me to pop a worm into it?" This speech made them all roar, but it was not in itself amusing, the reader will perceive. And to go on in that strain for hours is extremely fatiguing, more so than the hardest work. Many people wondered why she should take the trouble to have all these men about her, and to undertake the Herculean task of entertaining them, which was a mystery quite as great as the per-

sistence of the elder ladies in going to feasts where they are called old cats and receive no attention. The lightest of social entertainments *donnent à penser* in this way. You would have thought that Mrs. Seton would have welcomed the moment of relief which ensued when the boys and girls ran off together in a sort of hide-and-seek among the tufted slopes. But when she found that she was actually left alone for a moment with only her husband to attend upon her, the lady was not pleased at all.

"Where have they all gone?" she cried. "What do they mean leaving me all alone? Where's Algy- and where's Sir Charles- and all of them?"

"There's nobody but me, I'm afraid, Lottie," said little Seton, who was strengthening himself with another glass of champagne; "they've all gone off with the young ones."

"The young ones!" Mrs. Seton cried, with a sort of suppressed shriek. The eldest of the Stanley girls was seated at a little distance, sedately employed in making a drawing, and Mrs. Shanks and Miss Mildmay sat resting upon a pile of carriage cushions which they had collected together when the others went away. The old ladies were much occupied in seeing that Perkins, the driver of the midge, had his share with the other servants of the relics of the feast. And was she, the brilliant, the gay, the lovely Lottie, left with these *débris* of humanity, deserted by her kind? She rose up hastily and flourished her parasol with an energy which nearly broke the ivory stick. "Have you no spirit at all," she cried, "to let your wife be neglected like this?" Katherine was the one who met her in full career as she went down the winding slopes—Katherine enjoying herself very moderately with none of the stolen goods about her, in sole company of Evelyn Stanley and Gerrard, her brother. "Where are all my party?" cried Mrs. Seton. "They will never forgive me for deserting them. You stole a march upon me, Miss Tredgold." But certainly it was not Katherine who had stolen the march. At this moment Stella appeared out of the bushes, flushed with fun and laughter, her pretty hat pushed back upon her head, her pretty hair in a little confusion.

"Oh, come along, come along!" she cried, seizing Mrs. Seton by the arm, "here's such a beautiful place to hide in; they are all after us, full cry. Come, come, we must have you on our side." Thus, again, it was Stella that was on the amusing side where all the fun and the pleasure was. Evelyn Stanley cast wistful eyes after the pair.

"Oh, Katherine, do you mind me going, too? Hide-and-seek is such fun, and we can walk here every day."

"Do you want to go, too, Gerrard?" Katherine said.

"Not if I may walk with you," said the youth, who was at the University and felt himself superior. He was only a year younger than she was, and he thought that a *grande passion* for a woman advanced in life was a fine thing for a young man. He had made up his mind to keep by Katherine's side whatever happened. "I don't care for that silly nonsense," he said; "it's very well for these military fellows that have not an idea in their heads. I always liked conversation best, and your conversation, dear Katherine——"

"Why, I cannot talk a bit," she said with a laugh.

It was on Gerrard's lips to say, "But I can." He had the grace, however, not to utter that sentiment. "There are some people whose silence is more eloquent than other people's talk," he said, which was a much prettier thing to say.

"Oh, why didn't you come at first?" cried Stella in Mrs. Seton's ear. "They all think you are with me, only that you've got some very cunning place to hide in; and here it is. I am sure they'll never find us here."

"I hope they will, though," said the elder lady, speaking in tones that were not at all subdued. "You need not be so clever with your cunning places. Of course we want them to find us; there is no fun in it if they don't."

Stella stared a little with widely opened eyes at her experienced companion. She was still schoolgirl enough to rejoice in baffling the other side, and liked the fun simply as Evelyn Stanley did, who was only sixteen, and who came crowding in upon them whispering in her delight: "They've run down the other way, the whole lot of them like sheep; they have no

sense. Oh, hush ! hush ! speak low ! they'll never think of a place like this."

"I shall make them think," cried Mrs. Seton, and then she began to sing snatches of songs, and whistled through the thicket to the astonishment of the girls.

"Oh, that is no fun at all," said Evelyn.

"Hush !" cried Stella, already better informed, "it isn't any fun if they don't find us, after all."

And then the train of young men came rushing back with shouts, and the romp went on. It was so far different from other romps that when the fun flagged for a moment the faces of the players all grew blank again, as if they had at once relapsed into the heavy dulness which lay behind, which was rather astonishing to the younger ones, who loved the game for its own sake. Stella, for her part, was much impressed by this recurring relapse. How exquisite must be the fun to which they were accustomed, which kept them going ! She was painfully aware that she flagged too, that her invention was not quick enough to think of something new before the old was quite exhausted. She had thought of nothing better than to go on, to hide again, when Mrs. Seton, yawning, sat down to fan herself, and said what Stella thought the rudest things to her cavaliers.

"Why does Charlie Somers look so like an ass ?" she said. "Do you give it up ? Because he's got thistles all round him and can't get at 'em."

Stella stared while the young men burst into noisy laughter.

"Is that a conundrum ?" Stella said.

They thought this was wit too, and roared again. And then once more all the faces grew blank. It was her first experience of a kind of society decidedly above her level, and it was impressive as well as alarming to the inexperienced young woman. It had been her habit to amuse herself, not doubting that in doing so she would best promote the amusement of her guests. But Stella now began to feel the responsibilities of an entertainer. It was not all plain sailing. She began to under-

stand the rush of reckless talk, the excited tones, the startling devices of her new friend. In lack of anything better, the acceptance of a cigar on Mrs. Seton's part, and the attempt to induce Stella to try one too, answered for a moment to the necessities of the situation. They were not very particular as to the selection of things to amuse them, so long as there was always something going on.

Sir Charles Somers sat with her on the box as she drove home, and gave her a number of instructions which at first Stella was disposed to resent.

"I have driven papa's horses ever since I was born," she said.

"But you might drive much better," said the young man, calmly putting his hand on hers, moulding her fingers into a better grasp upon the reins, as composedly as if he were touching the springs of an instrument instead of a girl's hand. She blushed, but he showed no sense of being aware that this touch was too much. He was the one of the strangers whom she liked best, probably because he was Sir Charles, which gave him a distinction over the others, or at least it did so to Stella. This was not, however, because she was unaccustomed to meet persons who shared the distinction, for the island people were very tolerant of such *nouveaux riches* as the Tredgolds, who were so very ready to add to their neighbours' entertainment. Two pretty girls with money are seldom disdained in any community, and the father, especially as he was so well advised as to keep himself out of society, was forgiven them, so that the girls were sometimes so favoured as to go to a ball under Lady Jane's wing, and knew all "the best people." But even to those who are still more accustomed to rank than Stella, Sir Charles sounds better than Mr. So-and-so; and he had his share of good looks, and of that ease in society which even she felt herself to be a little wanting in. He did not defer to the girl, or pay her compliments in any old-fashioned way. He spoke to her very much as he spoke to the other young men, and gripped her fingers to give them the proper grasp of the reins with as much force of grip and as

perfect calm as if she had been a boy instead of a girl. This rudeness has, it appears, its charm.

"I shouldn't have wondered if he had called me Tredgold," Stella said with a pretence at displeasure.

"What a horrid man!" Katherine replied, to whom this statement was made.

"Horrid yourself for thinking so," cried her sister. "He is not a horrid man at all, he is very nice. We are going to be great—pals. Why shouldn't we be great pals? He is a little tired of Lottie Seton and her airs, he said. He likes nice honest girls that say what they mean, and are not always bullying a fellow. Well, that is what he said. It is his language, it is not mine. You know very well that is how men speak, and Lottie Seton does just the same. I told him little thanks to him to like girls better than an old married woman, and you should have seen how he tugged his moustache and rolled in his seat with laughing. Lottie Seton must have suspected something, for she called out to us what was the joke?"

"I did not know you were on such terms with Mrs. Seton, Stella, as to call her by her Christian name."

"Oh, we call them all by their names. Life's too short for Missis That and Mr. This. Charlie asked me——"

"Charlie! why, you never saw him till to-day."

"When you get to know a man you don't count the days you've been acquainted with him," said Stella, tossing her head, but with a flush on her face. She added: "I asked him to come over to lunch to-morrow and to see the garden. He said it would be rare fun to see something of the neighbourhood without Lottie Seton, who was always dragging a lot of fellows about."

"Stella, what a very, very unpleasant man, to talk like that about the lady who is his friend, and who brought him here!"

"Oh, his friend!" cried Stella, "that is only your old-fashioned way. She is no more his friend! She likes to have a lot of men following her about everywhere, and they have got nothing to do, and are thankful to go out anywhere to

spend the time; so it is just about as broad as it is long. They do it to please themselves, and there is not a bit of love lost."

"I don't like those kind of people," said Katherine.

"They are the only kind of people," Stella replied.

This conversation took place from one room to another, the door standing open while the girls performed a hasty toilette. All the picnic people had been parted with at the gate with much demonstration of friendship and a thousand thanks for a delightful day. Only the midge had deposited its occupants at the door. The two old cats were never to be got rid of. They were at that moment in another room, making themselves tidy, as they said, with the supercilious aid of Katherine's maid. Stella did not part with hers in any circumstances, though she was about to dine in something very like a dressing-gown with her hair upon her shoulders. Mr. Tredgold liked to see Stella with her hair down, and she was not herself averse to the spectacle of the long rippled locks falling over her shoulders. Stella was one of the girls who find a certain enjoyment in their own beauty even when there is nobody to see.

"It was a very pleasant party on the whole to be such an impromptu," said Mrs. Shanks; "your girls, Mr. Tredgold, put such a spirit in everything. Dear girls! Stella is always the most active and full of fun, and Katherine the one that looks after one's comfort. Don't you find the Stanleys, Kate, a little heavy in hand?—excellent good people, don't you know, always a stand-by, but five of them, fancy! Marion that is always at her drawing, and Edith that can talk of nothing but the parish, and that little romp Evelyn who is really too young and too childish! Poor Mr. Stanley has his quiver too full, poor man, like so many clergymen."

"If ever there was a man out of place—the Rector at a picnic!" said Miss Mildmay. "with nobody for him to talk to. I'll tell you what it is, Mr. Tredgold, he thinks Kate is such a steady creature, he wants her for a mother to his children: now see if I am not a true prophet before the summer is out."

Mr. Tredgold's laugh, which was like the tinkling of a tin vessel, reached Katherine's ear at the other end of the table, but not the speech which had called it forth.

"Papa, the officers are coming here to-morrow to lunch—you don't mind, do you?—that is, Charlie Somers and Algy Scott. Oh, they are nice enough; they are dreadfully dull at Newport. They want to see the garden and anything there is to see. You know you're one of the sights of the island, papa."

"That is their fun," said the old man. "I don't know what they take me for, these young fellows that are after the girls. Oh, they're all after the girls; they know they've got a good bit of money and so forth, and think their father's an easy-going old fool as soft as——Wait till we come to the question of settlements, my good ladies, wait till then; they'll not find me so soft when we get there."

"It is sudden to think of settlements yet, Mr. Tredgold. The Rector, poor man, has got nothing to settle, and as for those boys in the garrison, they never saw the dear girls till to-day."

"Ah, I know what they are after," said Mr. Tredgold. "My money, that is what they are all after. Talk to me about coming to see over the garden and so forth! Fudge! it is my money they are after; but they'll find I know a thing or two before it comes to that."

"Papa," said Stella, "you are just an old suspicious absurd——What do they know about your money? They never heard your name before. Of course they had heard of *me*. The other battalion were all at the Ryde ball, and took notes. They thought I was an American, that shows how little they know about you."

"That means, Stella," said Miss Mildmay, "everything that is fast and fly-away. I wouldn't brag of it if I were you."

"It means the fashion," said Mrs. Shanks. "Dear Stella is like that, with her nice clothes, and her way of rushing at everything, and never minding. Now Katherine is English, no mistake about her—a good daughter, don't you know—and she'll make an excellent wife."

"But the man will have to put down his money, piece for piece, before he shall have her, I can tell you," said the master of the house. "Oh, I'm soft if you like it, and over-indulgent, and let them have all their own way ; but there's not a man in England that stands fister when it comes to that."

Stella gave her sister a look, and a little nod of her head ; her eyes danced and her hair waved a little, so light and fluffy it was, with that slight gesture. It seemed to say, We shall see ! It said to Katherine, " You might stand that, but it will not happen with me." The look and the gesture were full of a triumphant defiance. Stella was not afraid that she would ever feel the restraining grip of her father's hand ; and then she thought of that other grip upon her fingers, and shook her shiny hair about her ears more triumphant still.

CHAPTER IV.

STELLA, however, courageous as she was, was not bold enough to address Sir Charles and his companion as Charlie and Algy when they appeared, not next day, but some days later; for their engagements with Mrs. Seton and others of their friends were not so lightly to be pushed aside for the attraction of her society as the girl supposed. It was a little disappointing to meet them with their friends, not on the same sudden level of intimacy which had been developed by the picnic, and to be greeted indifferently, "like anybody else," after that entertainment and its sudden fervour of acquaintance. When, however, Mrs. Seton left the hotel, and the young men had no longer that resource in their idleness, they appeared at the Cliff without further invitation, and with an evident disposition to profit by its hospitality which half flattered and half offended the girls.

"They have never even left cards," said Katherine, after the picnic, "but now that their friends have gone they remember that you asked them, Stella."

"Well," cried Stella, "that is so much the more friendly. Do you suppose they haven't hundreds of places to go to? And when they choose *us*, are we to be disagreeable? I shan't be so at least."

She ran downstairs indeed wreathed with smiles, and received them with an eager gratification, which was very flattering to the young men, who opened their eyes at the luxury of the luncheon and gave each other a look which said that here was something worth the trouble. Old Mr. Tredgold, in his shabby coat and his slippers, was a curious feature in the group; but it was by no means out of keeping that a rich old

father, who had begun life with half a crown, should thus fulfil his part, and the young men laughed at his jokes, and elevated an eyebrow at each other across the table, with a sense of the fun of it, which perplexed and disturbed the two young women, to whom they were still figures unaccustomed, about whose modes and manners they were quite unassured. Katherine took it all seriously, with an inclination towards offence, though it is not to be supposed that the advent of two young officers, more or less good-looking and a novelty in her life, should not have exercised a little influence upon her also. But Stella was in a state of suppressed excitement which made her eyes shine indeed, and brightened her colour, but was not very pleasant to behold for anyone who loved her. She was half offended with her father for the share he took in the conversation, and angry with the young men who listened to and applauded him, without remarking her own attempts to be witty. Her voice, though it was a pretty voice, grew a little shrill in her endeavours to attract their attention and to secure the loud outbursts of laughter which had been used to accompany Mrs. Seton's sallies. What was it about Mrs. Seton which amused them? She said nothing remarkable, except for rudeness and foolishness, and yet they laughed; but to Stella's funniest remarks they gave but a gape of inattention, and concentrated their attention on her father—on papa! What could they possibly see in him?

It was consolatory, however, when they all went out into the garden after lunch, to find that they came one on each side of her instinctively with a just discrimination, leaving Katherine out. Stella, to do her justice, did not want Katherine to be left entirely out. When her own triumph was assured she was always willing that there should be something for her sister. But it was well at least that the strangers should recognise that she was the centre of everything. She led them, as in duty bound, through all the rare trees and shrubs which were the glory of the Cliff. "This papa had brought all the way from Brazil, or somewhere. It is the first one that ever was grown in England; and just look at those berries! Wain, the gar-

dener, has coaxed them to grow, giving them all sorts of nice things to eat. Oh, I couldn't tell you all he has given them—old rags and rusty nails and all kinds of confectioneries ! ”

“ Their dessert, eh ? ” said Sir Charles. He had stuck his glass in his eye, but he looked gloomily at all the wonderful plants. Algy put up his hand to his moustache, under which his mouth gaped more open than usual, with a yawn. Stella remembered that Mrs. Seton had proposed to pop a worm into it, and longed to make use, though at second hand, of that famous witticism, but had not the courage. They looked about blankly even while she discoursed, with roving yet vacant looks, seeking something to entertain them. Stella could not entertain them—oh, dreadful discovery ! She did not know what to say ; her pretty face began to wear an anxious look, her colour became hectic, her eyes hollow with eagerness, her voice loud and shrill with the strain. Mrs. Seton could keep them going, could make them laugh at nothing, could maintain a whirl of noisy talk and jest ; but Stella could not amuse these two heavy young men. Their opaque eyes went roving round the beautiful place in search of some “ fun,” their faces grew more and more blank. It was Katherine, who did not pretend to be amusing, who had so very little to say for herself, who interposed :

“ Don't you think,” she said, “ Stella, they might like to look at the view ? Sliplin Harbour is so pretty under the cliff, and then there are some yachts.”

“ Oh, let's look at the yachts,” the young men said, pushing forward with a sudden impulse of interest. The bay was blazing in the afternoon sunshine, the distant cliff a dazzle of whiteness striking sharp against the blue of sky and sea ; but the visitors did not pause upon anything so insignificant as the view. They stumbled over each other in their anxiety to see the little vessel which lay at the little pier, one white sail showing against the same brilliant background. Whose was it ? Jones's for a wager, the *Liely Jinny*. No, no, nothing of the sort. Howard's the *Inscrutable*, built for Napier, don't you know, before he went to the dogs.”

Stella pressed forward into the discussion with questions which she did not know to be irrelevant. What was the meaning of clipper-rigged? Did raking-masts mean anything against anyone's character? Which was the jib, and why should it be of one shape rather than another? The gentlemen paid very little attention to her. They went on discussing the identity of the toy ship with interest and fervour.

"Why, I know her like the palm of my hand," cried Sir Charles. "I steered her through that last westerly gale, and a tough one it was. I rather think if any one should know her, it's I. The *Lively Jinny*, and a livelier in the teeth of a gale I never wish to see."

"Pooh!" said the other. "You're as blind as a bat, Charlie, everyone knows; you wouldn't know your best friend at that distance. It's Howard's little schooner that he bought when poor Napier went to——"

"I tell you it's *Jinny*, the fetish of Jones's tribe. I know her as well as I know you. Ten to one in sovs."

"I'll take you," cried the other. "Howard's, and a nice little craft; but never answers her helm as she ought, that's why he calls her the *Inscrutable*."

"What a strange thing," cried Stella, toiling behind them in her incomprehension, "not to answer your helm! What is your helm, and what does it say to you? Perhaps she doesn't understand."

This, she thought, was *à la mode de* Mrs. Seton, but it produced no effect, not even a smile.

"You could see the figure-head with a glass," said Captain Scott. "Where's the glass, Miss Tredgold? There ought to be a glass somewhere."

"Jove!" cried Sir Charles. "Fancy a look-out like this and no telescope. What could the people be thinking of?"

"You are very rude to call papa and me the people," cried Stella, almost in tears. "Who cares for a silly little cockle-shell of a boat? But it is a good thing at least that it gives you something to talk about—which I suppose you can understand."

"Hullo!" said the one visitor to the other, under his breath, with a look of surprise.

"If it is only a glass that is wanted," said Katherine, "why shouldn't we all have a look? There is a telescope, you know, upstairs."

Stella flashed out again under the protection of this suggestion. "I'll run," she said, being in reality all compliance and deeply desirous to please, "and tell one of the footmen to bring it down."

"Too much trouble," and "What a bore for you to have us on your hands!" the young men said.

"Don't, Stella," said Katherine; "they had better go up to papa's observatory, where they can see it for themselves."

"Oh, yes," cried the girl, "come along, let's go to papa's observatory, that will be something for you to do. You always want something to do, don't you? Come along, come along!" Stella ran on before them with heated cheeks and blazing eyes. It was not that she was angry with them, but with herself, to think that she could not do what Mrs. Seton did. She could not amuse them, or keep up to their high level of spirits; and the vacancy of the look which came over both their faces—the mouth of Algy under his moustache, the eyes of Charlie staring blankly about in search of a sensation—were more than her nerves could bear. And yet she was alarmed beyond measure, feeling her own prestige in question, by the thought that they might never come again.

Papa's observatory was a terrace on the leads between the two gables where the big telescope stood. Was it a pity, or was it not, that papa was there in his shabby coat sniffing at the ships as they went out to sea? He had an extended prospect on all sides, and he was watching a speck on the horizon with much interest through the glass. "Perhaps you young fellows have got some interest in the shipping like me?" he said. "There, don't you see the *Haitch* and the *Ho* on the pennant just slipping out of sight? I have a deal of money in that ship. I like to see them pass when it's one I have an interest in. Put your little peeper here, Stella, you'll see her

yet. They pay very well with proper care. You have to keep your wits about you, but that's the case with all investments. Want to see any particular ship, eh? I hope you've got some money in 'em," Mr. Tredgold said.

"Oh, papa, take your horrid thing away; you know I never can see anything," cried Stella. "Now look, now look, Sir Charles! Remember, I back you. The *Jenny* before the world."

"Miss Tredgold, put a sixpence on me," said Algy; "don't let a poor fellow go into the ring unprotected. It's Howard's or nobody's."

"Betting?" said Mr. Tredgold. "It is not a thing I approve of, but we all do it, I suppose. That little boat, if that is what you're thinking of, belongs to none of those names. It's neither the *Jones* nor the *Howard*. It's the *Stella*, after that little girl of mine, and it's my boat, and you can take a cruise in it if you like any day when there's no wind."

"Oh, papa," cried Stella, "is it really, really for me?"

"You little minx," said the old man as she kissed him, "you little fair weather flatterer, always pleased when you get something! I know you, for all you think you keep it up so well. Papa's expected always to be giving you something—the only use, ain't it? of an old man. It's a bit late in the season to buy a boat, but I got it a bargain, a great bargain."

"Then it was Jones's," cried Sir Charles.

"Then Howard was the man," cried his friend.

"That's delightful," cried Stella, clapping her hands. "Do keep it up! I will put all my money on Sir Charles." And they were so kind that they laughed with her, admiring the skip and dance of excitement which she performed for their pleasure. But when it turned out that Mr. Tredgold did not know from whom he had bought the boat, and that the figure-head had been removed to make room for a lovely wooden lady in white and gold with a star on her forehead, speculation grew more and more lively than ever. It was Stella, in the excitement of that unexpected success, who proposed to run down to the pier to examine into the yacht and see if any

solution was possible. "We have a private way," she cried. "I'll show you if you'd like to come; and I want to see my yacht, and if the *Stella* on it is like me, and if it is pretty inside, and everything. And, Kate, while we're gone, you might order tea. Papa, did you say the *Stella* on the figure-head was to be like me?"

"Nothing that is wooden could be like you," said Sir Charles graciously. It was as if an oracle had spoken. Algy opened his mouth under his moustache with a laugh or gape which made Stella long there and then to repeat Mrs. Seton's elegant jest. She was almost bold enough in the flush of spirits which Sir Charles's compliment had called forth.

"I wish Stella would not rush about with those men," said Katherine, as the noise of their steps died away upon the stairs.

"Jealous, eh?" said her father. "Well, I don't wonder—and they can't both have her. One of them might have done the civil by you, Katie—but they're selfish brutes, you know, are men."

Katherine perhaps walked too solemnly away in the midst of this unpalatable consolation, and was undutifully irritated by her father's tin-tinkle of a laugh. She was not jealous, but the feeling perhaps was not much unlike that unlovely sentiment. She declared indignantly to herself that she did not want them to "do the civil" to her, these dull frivolous young men, and that it was in the last degree injurious to her to suggest anything of the sort. It was hopeless to make her father see what was her point of view, or realise her feelings—as hopeless as it was to make Stella perceive how little fit it was that she should woo the favour of these rude strangers. Mrs. Seton might do it with that foolish desire to drag about a train with her, to pose as a conqueror, to—— Katherine did not know what words to use. But Stella, a girl! Stella, who was full of real charm, who was fit for so much better things! On the whole, Katherine found it was better to fulfil the homely duties that were hers and give her orders about the tea. It was the part in life that was apportioned to her, and why should she object

to it? It might not be the liveliest, but surely it was a more befitting situation than Stella's rush after novelty, her strain to please. And whom to please? People who sneered at them before their faces and did not take pains to be civil—not even to Stella.

It did her good to go out into the air, to select the spot under the acacia where the tea-table stood so prettily, with its shining white. It was still warm, extraordinary for October. She sat down there gazing out upon the radiance of the sea and sky; the rocky fringe of sand was invisible, and so was the town and harbour which lay at the foot of the cliff; beyond the light fringe of the tamarisk trees which grew there as luxuriantly as in warmer countries there was nothing but the sunny expanse of the water, dazzling under the Western sun, which was by this time low, shining level in the eyes of the solitary gazer. She saw, almost without seeing it, the white sail of a yacht suddenly gleam into the middle of the prospect before her, coming out all at once from the haven under the hill. Someone was going out for a sail, a little late indeed; but what could be more beautiful or tempting than this glorious afternoon! Katherine sighed softly with a half sensation of envy. A little puff of air came over her, blowing about the light acacia foliage overhead, and bringing down a little shower of faintly yellow leaves. The little yacht felt it even more than the acacia did. It seemed to waver a little, then changed its course, following the impulse of the breeze into the open. Katherine wondered indifferently who it could be. The yachting people were mostly gone from the neighbourhood. They were off on their longer voyages, or they had laid up their boats for the season. And there had begun to grow a windy look, such as dwellers by the sea soon learn to recognise about the sky. Katherine wished calmly to herself in her ignorance of who these people were that they might not go too far.

She was sitting thus musing and wondering a little that Stella and her cavaliers did not come back for tea, when the sound of her father's stick from the porch of the house startled her, and a loud discussion with somebody which he seemed to

be carrying on within. He came out presently, limping along with his stick and with a great air of excitement. "I said they were only to go when there was no wind. Didn't you hear me, Katie? When there was no wind—I said it as plain as anything. And look at that; look at that!" He was stammering with excitement, and could scarcely keep his standing in his unusual excitement.

"What is the matter, papa? Look at what? Oh, the boat. But we have nothing to do with any boat," she cried. "Why should you disturb yourself? The people can surely take care of——Papa! what is it?"

He had sunk into a chair, one of those set ready on the grass for Stella and her friends, and was growing purple in the face and panting for breath. "You fool! you fool! Stella," he cried, "Stella, my little girl. Oh, I'll be even with those young fools when I catch them. They want to drown her. They want to run away with her. Stella! my little girl!"

Katherine had awakened to the fact before these interrupted words were half uttered. And naturally what she did was perfectly unreasonable. She rushed to the edge of the cliff, waving aloft the white parasol in her hand, beckoning wildly, and crying, "Come back, come back!" She called all the servants, the gardener and his man, the footmen who were looking out alarmed from the porch. "Go, go," she cried, stamping her foot, "and bring them back; go and bring them back!" There was much rushing and running, and one at least of the men flung himself helter-skelter down the steep stair that led to the beach, while the gardeners stood gazing from the cliff. Katherine clapped her hands in her excitement, giving wild orders. "Go! go! don't stand there as if nothing could be done; go and bring them back!"

"Not to contradict you, Miss Katherine——" the gardener began.

"Oh, don't speak to me—don't stand talking—go, go, and bring them back."

Mr. Tredgold had recovered his breath a little. "Let us think," he said—"let us think, and don't talk nonsense, Kate.

There's a breeze blowing up, and where will it drive them to, gardener? Man, can't you tell where it'll drive them to? Round by the Needles, I shouldn't wonder, the dangerousest coast. Oh, my little girl, my little girl! Shall I ever see her again? And me that said they were never to go out but when there was no wind."

"Not to the Needles, sir—not to the Needles when there's a westerly breeze. More likely round the cliffs Bembridge way; and who can stop 'em when they're once out? It's only a little cruise; let 'em alone and they'll come home, with their tails be'ind them, as the rhyme says."

"And I said they were only to go out if there was no wind, gardener!" The old gentleman was almost weeping with alarm and anxiety, but yet he was comforted by what the man said.

"They are going the contrary way," cried Katherine.

"Bless you, miss, that's tacking, to catch the breeze. They couldn't go far, sir, could they? without no wind."

"And that's just what I wanted, that they should not go far—just a little about in the bay to please her. Oh, my little girl! She will be dead with fright; she will catch her death of cold, she will."

"Not a bit, sir," cried the gardener. "Miss Stella's a very plucky one. She'll enjoy the run, she'll enjoy the danger."

"The danger!" cried father and sister together.

"What a fool I am! There ain't none, no more than if they was in a duck pond," the gardener said.

And, indeed, to see the white sail flying in the sunshine over the blue sea, there did not seem much appearance of danger. With his first apprehensions quieted down, Mr. Tredgold stumbled with the help of his daughter's arm to the edge of the cliff within the feathery line of the tamarisk trees, attended closely by the gardener, who, as an islander born, was supposed to know something of the sea. The hearts of the anxious gazers fluctuated as the little yacht danced over the water, going down when she made a little lurch and curtsey before the breeze, and up when she went steadily by the wind, making one of those long tacks which the gardener ex-

plained were all made, though they seemed to lead the little craft so far away, with the object of getting back.

"Them two young gentlemen, they knows what they're about," the gardener said.

"And there's a sailor-man on board," said Mr. Tredgold—"a man that knows everything about it, one of the crew whose business it is——"

"I don't see no third man," said the gardener doubtfully.

"Oh, yes, yes, there's a sailor-man," cried the father. The old gentleman spoke with a kind of sob in his throat; he was ready to cry with weakness and trouble and exasperation, as the little vessel, instead of replying to the cries and wailings of his anxiety by coming right home as seemed to him the simplest way, went on tacking and turning, sailing further and further off, then heeling over as if she would go down, then fluttering with an empty sail that hung about the mast before she struck off in another direction, but never turning back. "They are taking her off to America!" he cried, half weeping, leaning heavily on Katherine's arm.

"They're tacking, sir, tacking, to bring her in," said the gardener.

"Oh, don't speak to me!" cried the unhappy father; "they are carrying her off to America. Who was it said there was nothing between this and America, Katie? Oh, my little girl! my little girl!"

And it may be partly imagined what were the feelings of those inexperienced and anxious people when the early October evening began to fall, and the blue sky to be covered with clouds flying, gathering, and dispersing before a freshening westerly gale.

CHAPTER V.

I WILL not enter in detail into the feelings of the father and sister on this alarming and dreadful night. No tragedy followed, the reader will feel well assured, or this history would never have been written. But the wind rose till it blew what the sailors called half a gale. It seemed to Katherine a hurricane—a horrible tempest, in which no such slender craft as that in which Stella had gone forth had a chance for life; and indeed the men on the pier with their conjectures as to what might have happened were not encouraging. She might have fetched Ventrone or one of those places by a long tack. She might have been driven out to the Needles. She mightn't know her way with those gentlemen only as was famous sailors with a fair wind, but not used to dirty weather. Katherine spent all the night on the pier gazing out upon the waste of water now and then lighted up by a fitful moon. What a change—what a change from the golden afternoon! And what a difference from her own thoughts!—a little grudging of Stella's success, a little wounded to feel herself always in the shade, and the horrible suggestion of Stella's loss, the dread that overwhelmed her imagination and took all her courage from her. She stood on the end of the pier, with the wind—that wind which had driven Stella forth out of sound and sight—blowing her about, wrapping her skirts round her, loosing her hair, making her hold tight to the rail lest she should be blown away. Why should she hold tight? What did it matter, if Stella were gone, whether she kept her footing or not? She could never take Stella's place with anyone. Her father would grudge her very existence that could not be sacrificed to save Stella. Already he had begun to reproach her. Why did you let her

go? What is the use of an elder sister to a girl if she doesn't interfere in such a case? And three years older, that ought to have been a mother to her.

Thus Mr. Tredgold had babbled in his misery before he was persuaded to lie down to await news which nothing that could be done would make any quicker. He had clamoured to send out boats—any number—after Stella. He had insisted upon hiring a steamer to go out in quest of her; but telegrams had to be sent far and wide and frantic messengers to Ryde—even to Portsmouth—before he could get what he wanted. And in the meantime the night had fallen, the wind had risen, and out of that blackness and those dashing waves, which could be heard without being seen, there came no sign of the boat. Never had such a night passed over the peaceful place. There had been sailors and fishermen in danger many a time, and distracted women on the pier; but what was that to the agony of a millionaire who had been accustomed to do everything with his wealth, and now raged and foamed at the mouth because he could do nothing? What was all his wealth to him? He was as powerless as the poor mother of that sailor-boy who was lost (there were so many, so many of them), and who had not a shilling in the world. Not a shilling in the world! It was exactly as if Mr. Tredgold had come to that. What could he do with all his thousands? Oh, send out a tug from Portsmouth, send out the fastest ferry-boat from Ryde, send out the whole fleet—fishing cobs, pleasure boats—everything that was in Suplin Harbour! Send everything, everything that had a sail or an oar, not to say a steam engine. A hundred pounds, a thousand pounds—anything to the man who would bring Stella back!

The little harbour was in wild commotion with all these offers. There were not many boats, but they were all preparing; the men clattering down the rolling shingle, with women after them calling to them to take care, or not to go out in the teeth of the gale. "If you're lost too what good will that do?" they shrieked in the wind, their hair flying like Katherine's, but not so speechless as she was. The darkness, the

flaring feeble lights, the stir and noise on the shore, with these shrieking voices breaking in, made a sort of Pandemonium unseen, taking double horror from the fact that it was almost all sound and sensation, made visible occasionally by the gleam of the moon between the flying clouds. Mr. Tredgold's house on the cliff blazed with lights from every window, and a great pan of fire wildly blazing, sending up great shadows of black smoke, was lit on the end of the pier—everything that could be done to guide them back, to indicate the way. Nothing of that sort was done when the fishermen were battling for their lives. But what did it all matter, what was the good of it all? Millionaire and pauper stood on the same level, hopeless, tearing their hair, praying their hearts out, on the blind margin of that wild invisible sea.

There was a horrible warning of dawn in the blackness when Stella, soaked to the skin, her hair lashing about her unconscious face like whips, and far more dead than alive, was at last carried home. I believe there were great controversies afterwards between the steam-tug and the fishing boats which claimed to have saved her—controversies which might have been spared, since Mr. Tredgold paid neither, fortified by the statement of the yachtsmen that neither had been of any use, and that the *Stella* had at last blundered her way back of her own accord and their superior management. He had to pay for the tug, which put forth by his orders, but only as much as was barely necessary, with no such gratuity as the men had hoped for; while to the fishers he would give nothing, and Katherine's allowance was all expended for six months in advance in recompensing these clamorous rescuers who had not succeeded in rescuing anyone.

Stella was very ill for a few days; when she recovered the wetting and the cold, then she was ill of the imagination, recalling more clearly than at first all the horrors which she had passed through. As soon as she was well enough to recover the use of her tongue she did nothing but talk of this tremendous experience in her life, growing proud of it as she got a little way beyond it and saw the thrilling character of

the episode in full proportion. At first she would faint away, or rather, almost faint away (between two which things there is an immense difference), as she recalled the incidents of that night. But after a while they became her favourite and most delightful subjects of conversation. She entertained all her friends with the account of her adventure as she lay pale, with her pretty hair streaming over her pillow, not yet allowed to get up after all she had gone through, but able to receive her habitual visitors.

"The feeling that came over me when it got dark, oh! I can't describe what it was," said Stella. "I thought it was a shadow at first. The sail throws such a shadow sometimes; it's like a great bird settling down with its big wing. But when it came down all round and one saw it wasn't a shadow, but darkness—night!—oh, how horrible it was! I thought I should have died, out there on the great waves and the water dashing into the boat, and the cliffs growing fainter and fainter, and the horrible, horrible dark!"

"Stella dear, don't excite yourself again. It is all over, God be praised."

"Yes, it's all over. It is easy for you people to speak who have never been lost at sea. It will never be over for me. If I were to live to be a hundred I should feel it all the same. The hauling up and the hauling down of that dreadful sail, carrying us right away out into the sea when we wanted to get home, and then flopping down all in a moment, while we rocked and pitched till I felt I must be pitched out. Oh, how I implored them to go back! 'Just turn back!' I cried. 'Why don't you turn back? We are always going further and further, instead of nearer. And oh! what will papa say and Katherine?' They laughed at first, and told me they were tacking, and I begged them, for Heaven's sake, not to tack, but to run home. But they would not listen to me. Oh, they are all very nice and do what you like when it doesn't matter; but when it's risking your life, and you hate them and are miserable and can't help yourself, then they take their own way."

"But they couldn't help it either," cried Evelyn, the rector's daughter. "They had to tack; they could not run home when the wind was against them."

"What do I care about the wind?" cried Stella. "They should not have made me go out if there was a wind. Papa said we were never to go out in a wind. I told them so. I said, 'You ought not to have brought me out.' They said it was nothing to speak of. I wonder what it is when it is something to speak of! And then we shipped a sea, as they called it, and I got drenched to the very skin. Oh, I don't say they were not kind. They took off their coats and put round me, but what did that do for me? I was chilled to the very bone. Oh, you can't think how dreadful it is to lie and see those sails swaying and to hear the men moving about and saying dreadful things to each other, and the boat moving up and down. Oh!" cried Stella, clasping her hands together and looking as if once more she was about almost to faint away.

"Stella, spare yourself, dear. Try to forget it; try to think of something else. It is too much for you when you dwell on it," Katherine said.

"Dwell on it!" cried Stella, reviving instantly. "It is very clear that *you* never were in danger of your life, Kate."

"I was in danger of *your* life," cried Katherine, "and I think that was worse. Oh, I could tell you a story, too, of that night on the pier, looking out on the blackness, and thinking every moment—but don't let us think of it, it is too much. Thank God, it is all over, and you are quite safe now."

"It is very different standing upon the pier, and no doubt saying to yourself what a fool Stella was to go out; she just deserves it all for making papa so unhappy, and keeping me out of bed. Oh, I know that was what you were thinking! and being like me with only a plank between me and—don't you know? The one is very, very different from the other, I can tell you," Stella said, with a little flush on her cheek.

And the Stanley girls who were her audience agreed with

her, with a strong sense that to be the heroine of such an adventure was, after all, when it was over, one of the most delightful things in the world. Her father also agreed with her, who came stumping with his stick up the stairs, his own room being below, and took no greater delight than to sit by her bedside and hear her go over the story again and again.

"I'll sell that little beast of a boat. I'll have her broken up for firewood. To think I should have paid such a lot of money for her, and her nearly to drown my little girl!"

"Oh, don't do that, papa," said Stella; "when it's quite safe and there is no wind I should like perhaps to go out in her again, just to see. But to be sure there was no wind when we went out—just a very little, just enough to fill the sail, they said; but you can never trust to a wind. I said I shouldn't go, only just for ten minutes to try how I liked it; and then that horrid gale came on to blow, and they began to tack, as they call it. Such nonsense that tacking, papa! when they began it I said, 'Why, we're going further off than ever; what I want is to get home.'"

"They paid no attention, I suppose—they thought they knew better," said Mr. Tredgold.

"They always think they know better," cried Stella, with indignation. "And oh, when it came on to be dark, and the wind always rising, and the water coming in, in buckets full! Were you ever at sea in a storm, papa?"

"Never, my pet," said Mr. Tredgold, "trust me for that. I never let myself go off firm land, except sometimes in a penny steamboat, that's dangerous enough. Sometimes the boilers blow up, or you run into some other boat; but on the sea, not if I know it, Stella."

"But I have," said the girl. "A steamboat! within the two banks of a river! You know nothing, nothing about it, neither does Katherine. Some sailors, I believe, might go voyages for years and never see anything so bad as that night. Why, the waves were mountains high, and then you seemed to slide down to the bottom as if you were going—oh! hold me, hold me, papa, or I shall feel as if I were going again."

"Poor little Stella," said Mr. Tredgold, "poor little girl! What a thing for her to go through, so early in life! But I'd like to do something to those men. I'd like to punish them for taking advantage of a child like that, all to get hold of my new boat, and show how clever they were with their tacking and all that. Confound their tacking! If it hadn't been for their tacking she might have got back to dinner and saved us such a miserable night."

"What was your miserable night in comparison to mine?" cried Stella, scornfully. "I believe you both think it was as bad as being out at sea, only because you did not get your dinner at the proper time and were kept longer than usual out of bed."

"We must not forget," said Katherine, "that after all, though they might be to blame in going out, these gentlemen saved her life."

"I don't know about that," said the old man. "I believe it was my tug that saved her life. It was they that put her life in danger, if you please. I'd like just to break them in the army, or sell them up, or something; idle fellows doing nothing, strolling about to see what mischief they can find to do."

"Oh, they are very nice," said Stella. "You shan't do anything to them, papa. I am great chums with Charlie and Algy; they are such nice boys, really, when you come to know them; they took off their coats to keep me warm. I should have had inflammation of the lungs or something if I had not had their coats. I was shivering so."

"And do you know," said Katherine, "one of them is ill, as Stella perhaps might have been if he had not taken off his coat."

"Oh, which is that?" cried Stella; "oh, do find out which is that? It must be Algy, I think. Algy is the delicate one. He never is good for much—he gives in, you know, so soon. He is so weedy, long, and thin, and no stamina, that is what the others say."

"And is that all the pity you have for him, Stella? when it was to save you——"

"It was not to save me," cried Stella, raising herself in her bed with flushed cheeks, "it was to save himself! If I hadn't been saved where would they have been? They would have gone to the bottom too. Oh, I can't see that I'm so much obliged to them as all that! What they did they did for themselves far more than for me. We were all in the same boat, and if I had been drowned they would have been drowned too. I hope, though," she said, more amiably, "that Algy will get better if it's he that is ill. And it must be he. Charlie is as strong as a horse. He never feels anything. Papa, I hope you will send him grapes and things. I shall go and see him as soon as I am well."

"You go and see a young fellow—in his room! You shall do nothing of the sort, Stella. Things may be changed from my time, and I suppose they are, but for a girl to go and visit a young fellow—in his——"

Stella smiled a disdainful and amused smile as she lay back on her pillow. "You may be sure, papa," she said, "that I certainly shall. I will go and nurse him, unless he has someone already. I ought to nurse the man who helped to save my life."

"You are a little self-willed, wrong-headed—— Katherine, you had better take care. I will make you answer for it if she does anything so silly — a chit of a girl! I'll speak to Dr. Dobson. I'll send to — to the War Office. I'll have him carted away."

"Is poor Algy here, Kate? Where is he — at the hotel? Oh, you dreadful hard-hearted people to let him go to the hotel when you knew he had saved my life. Papa, go away, and let me get dressed. I must find out how he is. I must go to him, poor fellow. Perhaps the sight of me and to see that I am better will do him good. Go away, please, papa."

"I'll not budge a step," cried the old gentleman. "Katie, Katie, she'll work herself into a fever. She'll make herself ill, and then what shall we do?"

"I'm very ill already," said Stella, with a cough. "I am being thrust into my grave. Let them bring us together —"

poor, poor Algy and me. Oh, if we are both to be victims, let it be so ! We will take each other's hands and go down — go down together to the——”

“ Oh, Katie, can't you stop her ? ” cried the father.

Stella was sobbing with delicious despair over the thought of the two delightful, dreadful funerals, and all the world weeping over her untimely fate.

Stella recovered rapidly when her father was put to the door. She said with a pretty childish reverberation of her sob : “ For you know, Kate, it never was he — that would be the poignant thing, wouldn't it ? — it was not he that I ever would have chosen. But to be united in — in a common fate, with two graves together, don't you know, and an inscription, and people saying, ‘ Both so young ! ’ ” She paused to dry her eyes, and then she laughed. “ There is nothing in him, don't you know ; it was Charlie that did all the work. He was nearly as frightened as I was. Oh, I don't think anything much of Algy, but I shall go to see him all the same — if it were only to shock papa.”

“ You had better get well yourself in the meantime,” said Katherine.

“ Oh, you cold, cold — toad ! What do you care ? It would have been better for you if I had been drowned, Kate. Then you would have been the only daughter and the first in the house, but now, you know, it's Stella again — always Stella. Papa is an unjust old man and makes favourites ; but you need not think, however bad I am, and however good you are, that you will ever cure him of that.”

CHAPTER VI.

WHEN Stella was first able to appear out of the shelter of her father's grounds for a walk, she was the object of a sort of ovation — as much of an ovation as it is possible to make in such a place. She was leaning on her sister's arm and was supported on the other side by a stick, as it was only right a girl should be who had gone through so much. And she was very prettily pale, and looked more interesting than words could say, leaning heavily (if anything about Stella could be called heavy) upon Katherine, and wielding her stick with a charming air of finding it too much for her, yet at the same time finding it indispensable. There was nobody in the place who did not feel the attraction of sympathy, and the charm of the young creature who had been rescued from the very jaws of death and restored to the family that adored her. To think what might have been! — the old man broken-hearted and Katherine in deep mourning going and coming all alone, and perhaps not even a grave for the unfortunate Stella — lost at sea! Some of the ladies who thronged about her, stopping her to kiss her and express the depths of sympathetic anguish through which they had gone, declared that to think of it made them shudder. Thank Heaven that everything had ended so well! Stella took all these expressions of sympathy very sweetly. She liked to be the chief person, to awaken so much emotion, to be surrounded by so many flatteries. She felt, indeed, that she, always an interesting person, had advanced greatly in the scale of human consideration. She was more important by far since she had "gone through" that experience. They had been so near to losing her; everybody felt now fully what it was to have her. The rector had returned thanks publicly

in church, and every common person about the streets court-sied or touched his hat with a deeper sentiment. To think that perhaps she might have been drowned — she, so young, so fair, so largely endowed with everything that heart could desire! If her neighbours were moved by this sentiment, Stella herself was still more deeply moved by it. She felt to the depths of her heart what a thing it was for all these people that she should have been saved from the sea.

Public opinion was still more moved when it was known where Stella was going when she first set foot outside the gates — to inquire after the rash young man who, popular opinion now believed, had beguiled her into danger. How good, how sweet, how forgiving of her! Unless, indeed, there was something—something between them, as people say. This added a new interest to the situation. The world of Sliplin had very much blamed the young men. It had thought them inexcusable from every point of view. To have taken an inexperienced girl out, who knew nothing about yachting, just when that gale was rising! It was intolerable and not to be forgiven. This judgment was modified by the illness of Captain Scott, who, everybody now found, was delicate, and ought not to have exposed himself to the perils of such an expedition. It must have been the other who was to blame, but then the other conciliated everybody by his devotion to his friend. And the community was in a very soft and amiable mood altogether when Stella was seen to issue forth from her father's gates leaning on Katherine at one side and her stick on the other, to ask for news of her fellow-sufferer. This mood rose to enthusiasm at the sight of her paleness and at the suggestion that there probably was something between Stella and Captain Scott. It was supposed at first that he was an honourable, and a great many peerages fluttered forth. It was a disappointment to find that he was not so; but at least his father was a baronet, and himself an officer in a crack regiment, and he had been in danger of his life. All these circumstances were of an interesting kind.

Stella, however, did not carry out this tender purpose at

once. When she actually visited the hotel and made her way upstairs into Captain Scott's room her own convalescence was complete, and the other invalid was getting well, and there was not only Katherine in attendance upon her, but Sir Charles, who was now commonly seen with her in her walks, and about whom Sliplin began to be divided in its mind whether it was he and not the sick man between whom and Stella there was something. He was certainly very devoted, people said, but then most men were devoted to Stella. Captain Scott had been prepared for the visit, and was eager for it, notwithstanding the disapproval of the nurse, who stood apart by the window and looked daggers at the young ladies, or at least at Stella, who took the chief place by the patient's bedside and began to chatter to him, trying her best to get into the right tone, the tone of Mrs. Seton, and make the young man laugh. Katherine, who was not "in it," drew aside to conciliate the attendant a little.

"I don't hold with visits when a young man is so weak," said the nurse. "Do you know, miss, that his life just hung on a thread, so to speak? We were on the point of telegraphing for his people, me and the doctor; and he is very weak still."

"My sister will only stay a few minutes," said Katherine. "You know she was with them in the boat and escaped with her life too."

"Oh, I can see, miss, as there was no danger of *her* life," said the nurse, indignant. "Look at her colour! I am not thinking anything of the boat. A nasty night at sea is a nasty thing, but nothing for them that can stand it. But he couldn't stand it; that's all the difference. The young lady may thank her stars as she hasn't his death at her door."

"It was her life that those rash young men risked by their folly," said Katherine, indignant in her turn.

"Oh, no," cried the nurse. "I know better than that. When he was off his head he was always going over it. 'Don't, Charlie, don't give in; there's wind in the sky. Don't give in to her. What does she know?' That was

what he was always a-saying. And there she sits as bold as brass, that is the cause."

"You take a great liberty to say so," said Katherine, returning to her sister's side.

Stella was now in full career.

"Oh, do you remember the first puff—how it made us all start? How we laughed at him for looking always at the sky! Don't you remember, Captain Scott, I kept asking you what you were looking for in the sky, and you kept shaking your head?"

Here Stella began shaking her head from side to side and laughing loudly—a laugh echoed by the two young men, but faintly by the invalid, who shook his head too.

"Yes, I saw the wind was coming," he said. "We ought not to have given in to you, Miss Stella. It doesn't matter now it's all over, but it wasn't nice while it lasted, was it?"

"Speak for yourself, Algy," said Sir Charles. "You were never made for a sailor. Miss Stella is game for another voyage to-morrow."

"Oh, if you like," cried Stella, "with a good man. I shall bargain for a good man—that can manage sails and all that. What is the fun of going out when the men with you won't sit by you and enjoy it. And all that silly tacking and nonsense—there should have been someone to do it, and you two should have sat by me."

They both laughed at this and looked at each other. "The fun is in the sailing—for us, don't you know," said Sir Charles. It was not necessary in their society even to pretend to another motive. Curiously enough, though Stella desired to ape that freedom, she was not—perhaps no woman is—delivered from the desire to believe that the motive was herself, to give her pleasure. She did not even now understand why her fellow-sufferers should not acknowledge this as the cause of their daring trip.

"Papa wants to thank you," she said, "for saving my life; but that's absurd, ain't it, for you were saving your own. If you had let me drown, you would have drowned too."

"I don't know. You were a bit in our way," said Sir Charles. "We'd have got on better without you, we should, by George! You were an awful responsibility, Miss Stella. I shouldn't have liked to have faced Lady Scott if Algy had kicked the bucket; and how I should have faced your father if you——"

"If that was all you thought of, I shall never, never go out with you again," cried Stella with an angry flush. But she could not make up her mind to throw over her two companions for so little. "It was jolly at first, wasn't it?" she said, after a pause, "until Al—Captain Scott began to look up to the sky, and open his mouth for something to fall in."

But they did not laugh at this, though Mrs. Seton's similar witticism had brought on fits of laughter. Captain Scott swore "By George!" softly under his breath; Sir Charles whistled—a very little, but he did whistle, at which sound Stella rose angry from her seat.

"You don't seem to care much for my visit," she cried, "though it tired me very much to come. Oh, I know now what is meant by fair-weather friends. We were to be such chums. You were to do anything for me; and now, because it came on to blow—which was not my fault——"

Here Stella's voice shook, and she was very near bursting into tears.

"Don't say that, Miss Stella; it's awfully jolly to see you; and it's dreadful dull lying here."

"And weren't all the old cats shocked!" cried Sir Charles. "Oh, fie!" putting up his hands to his eyes, "to find you had been out half the night along with Algy and me."

"I have not seen any old cats yet," said Stella, recovering her temper, "only the young kittens, and they thought it a most terrible adventure—like something in a book. You don't seem to think anything of that, you boys; you are all full of Captain Scott's illness, as if that dreadful, dreadful sail was nothing, except just the way he caught cold. How funny that is! Now I don't mind anything about catching cold or being in bed for a week; but the terrible sea, and the wind,

and the dark—these are what I never can get out of my mind."

"You see you were in no danger to speak of; but Algy was, poor fellow. He is only just clear of it now."

"I only got up for the first time a week ago," said Stella, aggrieved; but she did not pursue the subject. "Mrs. Seton is coming across to see us—both the invalids, she says; and perhaps she is one of the old cats, for she says she is coming to scold me as well as to pet me. I don't know what there is to scold about, unless perhaps she would have liked better to go out with you herself."

"That is just like Lottie Seton," they both said, and laughed as Stella's efforts never made them laugh. Why should they laugh at her very name when all the poor little girl could do in that way left them unmoved?

"She's a perfect dragon of virtue, don't you know?" said Algy, opening his wide mouth.

"And won't she give it to the little 'un!" said Sir Charles, with another outburst.

"I should like to know who is meant by the little 'un; and what it is she can give," said Stella with offence.

They both laughed again, looking at each other. "She's as jealous as the devil, don't you know?" and "Lottie likes to keep all the good things to herself," they said.

Stella was partly mollified to think that Mrs. Seton was jealous. It was a feather in her little cap. "I don't know if you think that sail was a good thing," she said. "She might have had it for me. It is a pity that she left so soon. You always seem to be much happier when you have her near."

"She's such fun, she's not a bad sort. She keeps fellows going," the young men replied.

"Well then," said Stella, getting up quickly, "you'll be amused, for she is coming. I brought you some grapes and things. I don't know if you'll find them amusing. Kate, I think I'm very tired. Coming out so soon has thrown me back again. And these gentlemen don't want any visits from us, I feel sure."

"Don't say that, Miss Stella," cried Sir Charles. "Algy's a dull beggar, that's the truth. He won't say what he thinks; but I hope you know me. Here, you must have my arm downstairs. You don't know the dark corners as I do. Algy, you dumb dog, say a word to the pretty lady that has brought you all these nice things. He means it all, Miss Stella, but he's tongue-tied."

"His mouth is open enough," said Stella as she turned away.

"Choke full of grapes, and that is the truth," said his friend. "And he's been very bad really, don't you know? Quite near making an end of it. That takes the starch out of a man, and just for a bit of fun. It wasn't his fun, don't you know? it was you and I that enjoyed it," Sir Charles said, pressing his companion's hand. Yes, she felt it was he whom she liked best, not Algy with his mouth full of grapes. His open mouth was always a thing to laugh at, but it is dreary work laughing alone. Sir Charles, on the other hand, was a handsome fellow, and he had always paid a great deal more attention to Stella than his friend. She went down the stairs leaning on his arm, Katherine following after a word of farewell to the invalid. The elder sister begged the young man to send to the Cliff for anything he wanted, and to come as soon as he was able to move, for a change. "Papa bade me say how glad we should be to have you."

Algy gaped at Katherine, who was supposed to be a sort of incipient old maid and no fun at all, with eyes and mouth wide. "Oh, thanks!" he said. He could not master this new idea. She had been always supposed to be elderly and plain, whereas it appeared in reality that she was just as pretty as the other one. He had to be left in silence to assimilate this new thought.

"Mind you tell me every word Lottie Seton says. She is fun when she is proper, and she just can be proper to make your hair stand on end. Now remember, Miss Stella, that's a bargain. You are to tell me every word she says."

"I shall do nothing of the sort; you must think much of

her indeed when you want to hear every word. I wonder you didn't go after her if you thought so much of her as that."

"Oh, yes, she's very amusing," said Sir Charles. "She doesn't always mean to be, bless you, but when she goes in for the right and proper thing! Mrs. Grundy is not in it, by Jove! She'll come to the hotel and go on at Algy; but it's with you that the fun will be. I should like to borrow the servant's clothes and get in a corner somewhere to hear. Lottie never minds what she says before servants. It is as if they were cabbages, don't you know?"

"You seem to know a great deal about Mrs. Seton, Sir Charles," said Stella severely; but he did not disown this or hesitate as Stella expected. He said, "Yes, by Jove," simply into his big moustache, meaning Stella did not know what of good or evil. She allowed him to put her into the carriage which was waiting without further remark. Stella began to feel that it was by no means plain sailing with these young soldiers. Perhaps they were not so silly with her as with Mrs. Seton, perhaps Stella was not so clever; and certainly she did not take the lead with them at all.

"I think they are rude," said Katherine; "probably they don't mean any harm. I don't think they mean any harm. They are spoiled and allowed to say whatever they like, and to have very rude things said to them. Your Mrs. Seton, for instance——"

"Oh, don't say my Mrs. Seton," said Stella. "I hate Mrs. Seton. I wish we had never known her. She is not one of our kind of people at all."

"But you would not have known these gentlemen whom you like but for Mrs. Seton, Stella."

"How dare you say gentlemen whom I like? as if it was something wrong! They are only boys to play about," Stella said.

Which, indeed, was not at all a bad description of the sort of sentiment which fills many girlish minds with an inclination that is often very wrongly defined. Boys to play about is a thing which every one likes. It implies nothing perhaps, it means the

most superficial of sentiments. It is to be hoped that it was only as boys to play about that Mrs. Seton herself took an interest in these young men. But her promise of a visit and a scold was perplexing to Stella. What was she to be scolded about, she whom neither her father nor sister had scolded, though she had given them such a night! And what a night she had given herself—terror, misery, and cold, a cold, perhaps, quite as bad as Algy Scott's, only borne by her with so much more courage! This was what Stella was thinking as she drove home. It was a ruddy October afternoon, very delightful in the sunshine, a little chilly out of it, and it was pleasant to be out again after her week's imprisonment, and to look across that glittering sea and feel what an experience she had gained. Now she knew the other side of it, and had a right to shudder and tell her awe-inspiring story whenever she pleased. "Oh, doesn't it look lovely, as if it could not harm anyone, but I could tell you another tale!" This was a possession which never could be taken from her, whoever might scold, or whoever complain.

CHAPTER VII.

"I ONLY wonder to find you holding up your head at all. Your people must be very silly people, and no mistake. What, to spend a whole night out in the bay with Charlie Somers and Algy Scott, and then to ask me what you have done? Do you know what sort of character these boys have got? They are nice boys, and I don't care about their morals, don't you know? as long as they're amusing. But then I've my husband always by me. Tom would no more leave me with those men by myself—though they're all well enough with anyone that knows how to keep them in order; but a young girl like you—it will need all that your friends can do to stand by you and to white-wash you, Stella. Tom didn't want me to come. 'You keep out of it. She has got people of her own,' he said; but I felt I must. And then, after all that, you lift up your little nozzle and ask what you have done!"

Stella sat up, very white, in the big easy-chair where she had been resting when Mrs. Seton marched in. The little girl was so entirely overwhelmed by the sudden downfall of all her pretensions to be a heroine that after the first minute of defiance her courage was completely cowed, and she could not find a word to say for herself. She was a very foolish girl carried away by her spirits, by her false conception of what was smart and amusing to do, and by the imperiousness natural to her position as a spoiled child whose every caprice was yielded to. But there was no harm, only folly, in poor little Stella's thoughts. She liked the company of the young men and the *éclat* which their attendance gave her. To drag about a couple of officers in her train was delightful to her. But further than that her innocent imagination did not go. Her wild adventure

in the yacht had never presented itself to her as anything to be ashamed of, and Mrs. Seton's horrible suggestion filled her with a consternation for which there was no words. And it gave her a special wound that it should be Mrs. Seton who said it, she who had first introduced her to the noisy whirl of a "set" with which by nature she had nothing to do.

"It was all an accident," Stella murmured at last; "everybody knows it was an accident. I meant to go—for ten minutes—just to try—and then the wind got up. Do you think I wanted to be drowned—to risk my life, to be so ill and frightened to death? Oh!" the poor little girl cried, with that vivid realisation of her own distress which is perhaps the most poignant sentiment in the world—especially when it is unappreciated by others. Mrs. Seton tossed her head; she was implacable. No feature of the adventure moved her except to wrath.

"Everybody knows what these accidents mean," she said, "and as for your life it was in no more danger than it is here. Charlie Somers knows the lay like the palm of his hand. He is one of the best sailors going. I confess I don't understand what *he* did it for. Those boys will do anything for fun; but it wasn't very great fun, I should think—unless it was the lark of the thing, just under your father's windows and so forth. I do think, Stella, you've committed yourself dreadfully, and I shouldn't wonder if you never got the better of it. I should never have held up my head again if it had been me."

They were seated in the pretty morning-room opening upon the garden, which was the favourite room of the two girls. The window was open to admit the sunshine of a brilliant noon, but a brisk fire was burning, for the afternoons were beginning to grow cold, when the sunshine was no longer there, with the large breath of the sea. Mrs. Seton had arrived by an early train to visit her friends, and had just come from Algy's sick bed to carry fire and flame into the convalescence of Stella. Her injured virtue, her high propriety, shocked by such proceedings as had been thus brought under her notice, were indescribable. She had given the girl a care-

less kiss with an air of protest against that very unmeaning endearment, when she came in, and this was how, without any warning, she had assailed the little heroine. Stella's courage was not at all equal to the encounter. She had held her own with difficulty before the indifference of the young men. She could not bear up at all under the unlooked-for attack of her friend.

"Oh, how cruel you are!—how unkind you are!—how dreadful of you to say such things!" she cried. "As if I was merely sport for them like a—like any sort of girl; a lack!—under my father's windows——" It was too much for Stella. She began to cry in spite of herself, in spite of her pride, which was not equal to this strain.

Katherine had come in unperceived while the conversation was going on.

"I cannot have my sister spoken to so," she said. "It is quite false in the first place, and she is weak and nervous and not able to bear such suggestions. If you have anything to say against Stella's conduct it will be better to say it to my father, or to me. If anybody was to blame, it was your friends who were to blame. They knew what they were about and Stella did not. They must be ignorant indeed if they looked upon her as they would do upon"—Katherine stopped herself hurriedly—"upon a person of experience—an older woman."

"Upon me, you mean!" cried Mrs. Seton. "I am obliged to you, Miss Tredgold! Oh, yes! I have got some experience and so has she, if flirting through a couple of seasons can give it. Two seasons!—more than that. I am sure I have seen her at the Cowes ball I don't know how many times! And then to pretend she doesn't know what men are, and what people will say of such an escapade as that! Why, goodness, everybody knows what people say; they will talk for a nothing at all, for a few visits you may have from a friend, and nothing in it but just to pass the time. And then to think she can be out a whole night with a couple of men in a boat, and nothing said! Do you mean

to say that you, who are old enough, I am sure, for anything——”

“Katherine is not much older than I am,” cried Stella, drying her tears. “Katherine is twenty-three—Katherine is——”

“Oh, I’m sure, quite a perfect person ! though you don’t always think so, Stella ; and twenty-three’s quite a nice age, that you can stand at for ever so long. And you are a couple of very impudent girls to face it out to me so, who have come all this way for your good, just to warn you. Oh, if you don’t know what people say, I do ! I have had it hot all round for far more innocent things ; but I’ve got Tom always to stand by me. Who’s going to stand by you when it gets told all about how you went out with Charlie Somers and Algy Scott all by yourself in a boat, and didn’t come back till morning ? You think perhaps it won’t be known ? Why, it’s half over the country already ; the men are all laughing about it in their clubs ; they are saying which of ’em was it who played gooseberry ? They aren’t the sort of men to play gooseberry, neither Algy nor Charlie. The old father will have to come down strong——”

Poor Stella looked up at her sister with distracted eyes. “Oh, Kate, what does she mean ? What does she mean ?” she cried.

“We don’t want to know what she means,” cried Katherine, putting her arms round her sister. “She speaks her own language, not one that we understand. Stella, Stella dear, don’t take any notice. What are the men in the clubs to you ?”

“I’d like to know,” said Mrs. Seton with a laugh, “which of us can afford to think like that of the men in the clubs. Why, it’s there that everything comes from. A good joke or a good story, that’s what they live by—they tell each other everything ! Who would care to have them, or who would ask them out, and stand their impudence if they hadn’t always the very last bit of gossip at their fingers’ ends ? And this is such a delicious story, don’t you know ? Charlie Som-

ers and Algy Scott off in a little pleasure yacht with a millionaire's daughter, and kept her out all night, by Jove, in a gale of wind to make everything nice! And now the thing is to see how far the old father will go. He'll have to do something big, don't you know? but whether Charlie or Algy is to be the happy man——"

"Kate!" said Stella with a scream, hiding her head on her sister's shoulder. "Take me away! Oh, hide me somewhere! Don't let me see anyone—anyone! Oh, what have I done—what have I done, that anything so dreadful should come to me."

"You have done nothing, Stella, except a little folly, childish folly, that meant nothing. Will you let her alone, please? You have done enough harm here. It was you who brought those—those very vulgar young men to this house."

Even Stella lifted her tearful face in consternation at Katherine's boldness, and Mrs. Seton uttered a shriek of dismay.

"What next—what next? Vulgar young men! The very flower of the country, the finest young fellows going. You've taken leave of your senses, I think. And to this house—oh, my goodness, what fun it is!—how they will laugh! To *this* house——"

"They had better not laugh in our hearing at least. This house is sacred to those who live in it, and anyone who comes here with such hideous miserable gossip may be prepared for a bad reception. Those vulgar cads!" cried Katherine. "Oh, that word is vulgar too, I suppose. I don't care—they are so if any men ever were, who think they can trifle with a girl's name and make her father come down—with what? his money you mean—it would be good sound blows if I were a man. And for what? to buy the miserable beings off, to shut their wretched mouths, to——"

"Katherine!" cried Stella, all aglow, detaching herself from her sister's arms.

"Here's heroics!" said Mrs. Seton; but she was overawed more or less by the flashing eyes and imposing aspect of this young woman, who was no "frump" after all as appeared,

but a person to be reckoned with—not Stella's duenna, but something in her own right. Then she turned to Stella, who was more comprehensible, with whom a friend might quarrel and make it up again and no harm done. "My dear," she said, "you are the one of this family who understands a little, who can be spoken to—I shan't notice the rude things your sister says—I was obliged to tell you, for it's always best to hear from a friend what is being said about you outside. You might have seen yourself boycotted, don't you know? and not known what it meant. But, I dare say, if we all stand by you, you'll not be boycotted for very long. You don't mean to be rude, I hope, to your best friends."

"Oh, Lottie! I hope you will stand by me," cried Stella. "It was all an accident, as sure, as sure——! I only took them to the yacht for fun—and then I thought I should like to see the sails up—for fun. And then—oh, it was anything but fun after that!" the girl cried.

"I dare say. Were you sick?—did you make an exhibition of yourself? Oh, I shall hear all about it from Algy—Charlie won't say anything, so he is the one, I suppose. Don't forget he's a very bad boy—oh, there isn't a good one between them! I shouldn't like to be out with them alone. But Charlie! the rows he has had everywhere, the scandals he has made! Oh, my dear! If you go and marry Charlie Somers, Stella, which you'll have to do, I believe——"

"He is the very last person she shall marry if she will listen to me!"

"Oh, you are too silly for anything, Katherine," said Stella, slightly pushing her away. "You don't know the world, you are goody-goody. What do you know about men? But I don't want to marry anyone. I want to have my fun. The sea was dreadful the other night, and I was terribly frightened and thought I was going to be drowned. But yet it was fun in a way. Oh, Lottie, you understand! One felt it was such a dreadful thing to happen, and the state papa and everybody would be in! Still it is very, very impudent to discuss me like that, as if I had been run away with. I wasn't in the

least. It was I who wanted to go out. They said the wind was getting up, but I didn't care, I said. 'Let's try.' It was all for fun. And it was fun, after all."

"Oh, if you take it in that way," said Mrs. Seton, "and perhaps it is the best way just to brazen it out. Say what fun it was for everybody. Don't go in for being pale and having been ill and all that. Laugh at Algy for being such a milksop. You are a clever little thing, Stella. I am sure that is the best way. And if I were you I should smooth down the old cats here—those old cats, you know, that came to the picnic—and throw dust in the eyes of Lady Jane, and then you'll do. I'll fight your battles for you, you may be sure. And then there is Charlie Somers. I wouldn't turn up my nose at Charlie Somers if I were you."

"He is nothing to me," said Stella. "He has never said a word to me that all the world—that Kate herself—mightn't hear. When he does it'll be time enough to turn up my nose, or not. Oh, what do I care? I don't want to have anybody to stand up for me. I can do quite well by myself, thank you. Kate, why should I sit here in a dressing gown? I am quite well. I want the fresh air and to run about. You are so silly; you always want to pet me and take care of me as if I were a child. I'm going out now with Lottie to have a little run before lunch and see the view."

"Brava," said Mrs. Seton. "you see what a lot of good I've done her—that is what she wants, shaking up, not being petted and fed with sweets. All right, Stella, run and get your frock on and I'll wait for you. You may be quite right, Miss Tredgold," she said, when Stella had disappeared, "to stand up for your family. But all the same it's quite true what I say."

"If it is true, it is abominable; but I don't believe it to be true," Katherine cried.

"Well, I don't say it isn't a shame. I've had abominable things said of me. But what does that matter so long as your husband stands by you like a brick, as Tom does? But if I were you, and Charlie Somers really comes forward—it is just

as likely he won't, for he ain't a marrying man, he likes his fun like Stella—but if he does come forward——"

"I hope he will have more sense than to think of such a thing. He will certainly not be well received."

"Oh, if you stick to that! But why should you now? If she married it would be the best thing possible for you. You ain't bad looking, and I shouldn't wonder if you were only the age she says. But with Stella here you seem a hundred, and nobody looks twice at you——"

Katherine smiled, but the smile was not without bitterness.

"You are very kind to advise me for my good," she said.

"Oh, you mean I'm very impudent—perhaps I am! But I know what I'm saying all the same. If Charlie Somers comes forward——"

"Advise him not to do so, you who are fond of giving advice," said Katherine, "for my father will have nothing to say to him, and it would be no use."

"Oh, your father!" said Mrs. Seton with contempt, and then she kissed her hand to Stella, who came in with her hat on ready for the "run" she had proposed. "Here she is as fresh as paint," said that mistress of all the elegancies of language—"what a good 'un I am for stirring up the right spirit! You see how much of an invalid she is now! Where shall we go for our run, Stella, now that you have made yourself look so killing? You don't mean, I should suppose, to waste that toilette upon me?"

"We'll go and look at the view," said Stella, "that is all I am equal to; and I'll show you where we went that night."

"Papa will be ready for his luncheon in half an hour, Stella."

"Yes, I know, I know! Don't push papa and his luncheon down my throat for ever," cried the girl. She too was a mistress of language. She went out with her adviser arm-in-arm, clinging to her as if to her dearest friend, while Katherine stood in the window, rather sadly, looking after the pair. Stella had been restored to her sister by the half-illness of her

rescue, and there was a pang in Katherine's mind which was mingled of many sentiments as the semi-invalid went forth hanging upon her worst friend. Would nobody ever cling to Katherine as Stella, her only sister, clung to this woman—this—woman! Katherine did not know what epithet to use. If she had had bad words at her disposal I am afraid she would have expended them on Mrs. Seton, but she had not. They were not in her way. Was it possible this—woman might be right? Could Stella's mad prank, if it could be called so—rather her childish, foolish impulse, meaning no harm—tell against her seriously with anybody in their senses? Katherine could not believe it—it was impossible. The people who had known her from her childhood knew that there was no harm in Stella. She might be thoughtless, disregarding everything that came in the way of her amusement, but after all that was not a crime. She was sure that such old cats as Mrs. Shanks and Miss Mildmay would never think anything of the kind. But then there was Lady Jane. Lady Jane was not an old cat; she was a very important person. When she spoke the word no dog ventured to bark. But then her kindness to the Tredgold girls had always been a little in the way of patronage. She was not of their middle-class world. The side with which she would be in sympathy would be that of the young men. The escapade in the boat would be to her their fun, but on Stella's it would not be fun. It would be folly of the deepest dye, perhaps—who could tell?—depravity. In fiction—a young woman not much in society instinctively takes a good many of her ideas from fiction—it had become fashionable of late to represent wicked girls, girls without soul or heart, as the prevailing type. Lady Jane might suppose that Stella, whom she did not know very well, was a girl without soul or heart, ready to do anything for a little excitement and a new sensation, without the least reflection what would come of it. Nay, was not that the *rôle* which Stella herself was proposing to assume? Was it not to a certain extent her real character? This thought made Katherine's heart ache. And how if Lady Jane should think she had really compro-

mised herself, forfeited, if not her good name, yet the bloom that ought to surround it? Katherine's courage sank at the thought. And, on the other hand, there was her father, who would understand none of these things, who would turn anybody out of his house who breathed a whisper against Stella, who would show Sir Charles himself the door.

CHAPTER VIII.

It would be absurd to suppose that Mrs. Shanks and Miss Mildmay had not heard the entire story of Stella's escape and all that led up to it, the foolish venture and the unexpected and too serious punishment. They had known all about it from the first moment. They had seen her running down to the beach with her attendants after her, and had heard all about the boat with the new figure-head which Mr. Tredgold had got a bargain and had called after his favourite child. And they had said to each other as soon as they had heard of it, "Mark my words! we shall soon hear of an accident to that boat." They had related this fact in all the drawing-rooms in the neighbourhood with great, but modest, pride when the accident did take place. But they had shown the greatest interest in Stella, and made no disagreeable remarks as to the depravity of her expedition. Nobody had been surprised at this self-denial at first, for no one had supposed that there was any blame attaching to the young party, two out of the three of whom had suffered so much for their imprudence; for Stella's cold and the shock to her nerves had at first been raised by a complimentary doctor almost to the same flattering seriousness as Captain Scott's pneumonia. Now the event altogether had begun to sink a little into the mild perspective of distance, as a thing which was over and done with, though it would always be an exciting reminiscence to talk of—the night when poor Stella Tredgold had been carried out to sea by the sudden squall, "just in her white afternoon frock, poor thing, without a wrap or anything."

This had been the condition of affairs before Mrs. Seton's visit. I cannot tell how it was breathed into the air that the

adventure was by no means such a simple matter, that Stella was somehow dreadfully in fault, that it would be something against her all her life which she would have the greatest difficulty in "living down." Impossible to say who sowed this cruel seed. Mrs. Seton declared afterwards that she had spoken to no one, except indeed the landlady of the hotel where Captain Scott was lying, and his nurse; but that was entirely about Algy, poor boy. But whoever was the culprit, or by what methods soever the idea was communicated, certain it is that the views of the little community were completely changed after that moment. It began to be whispered about in the little assemblies, over the tea-tables, and over the billiard-tables (which was worse), that Stella Tredgold's escapade was a very queer thing after all. It was nonsense to say that she had never heard of the existence of the *Stella* till that day, when it was well known that old Tredgold bragged about everything he bought, and the lot o' money, or the little money he had given for it; for it was equally sweet to him to get a great bargain or to give the highest price that had ever been paid. That he should have held his tongue about this one thing, was it likely? And she was such a daring little thing, fond of scandalising her neighbours; and she was a little fast, there could be no doubt; at all events, she had been so ever since she had made the acquaintance of that Mrs. Seton—that Seton woman, some people said. Before her advent it only had been high spirits and innocent nonsense; but since then Stella had been infected with a love of sensation and had learned to like the attendance of men—any men, it did not matter whom. If the insinuation was of Mrs. Seton's making, she was not herself spared in it.

Mrs. Shanks and Miss Mildmay were by no means the last to be infected by this wave of opinion. They lived close to each other in two little houses built upon the hill side, with gardens in long narrow strips which descended in natural terraces to the level of the high road. They were houses which looked very weedy and damp in the winter time, being surrounded by verandahs, very useful to soften the summer glow

but not much wanted in October when the wind blew heaps of withered leaves (if you ventured to call those rays of gold and crimson withered) under the shelter of their green trellises. There are few things more beautiful than these same autumn leaves; but a garden is sadly "untidy," as these ladies lamented, when covered with them, flying in showers from somebody else's trees, and accumulating in heaps in the corners of the verandahs. "The boy," who was the drudge of Mrs. Shanks' establishment, and "the girl" who filled the same place in Miss Mildmay's, swept and swept for ever, but did not succeed in "keeping them down;" and indeed, when these two ladies stepped outside in the sunny mornings, as often as not a leaf or two lighted, an undesired ornament upon the frills of Mrs. Shanks' cap or in the scanty coils of Miss Mildmay's hair. There was only a low railing between the two gardens in order not to break the beauty of the bank with its terraces as seen from below, and over this the neighbours had many talks as they superintended on either side the work of the boy and the girl, or the flowering of the dahlias which made a little show on Mrs. Shanks' side, or the chrysanthemums on the other. These winterly flowers were what the gardens were reduced to in October, though there were a few roses still to be found near the houses, and the gay summer annuals were still clinging on to life in rags and desperation along the borders, and a few sturdy red geraniums standing up boldly here and there.

"Have you heard what they are saying about Stella Tredgold?" said the one lady to the other one of these mornings. Mrs. Shanks had a hood tied over her cap, and Miss Mildmay a Shetland shawl covering her grey hair.

"Have I heard of anything else?" said the other, shaking her head.

"And I just ask you, Ruth Mildmay," said Mrs. Shanks, "do you think that little thing is capable of making up any plan to run off with a couple of officers? Good gracious, why should she do such a thing? She can have them as much as she likes at home. That silly old man will never stop her, but

feed them with the best of everything at breakfast, lunch, and dinner, if they like—and then be astonished if people talk. And as for Katherine—but I have no patience with Katherine,” the old lady said.

“If it’s only a question what Stella Tredgold is capable of,” answered Miss Mildmay, “she is capable of making the hair stand up straight on our heads—and there is nothing she would like better than to do it.”

“Ah,” said Mrs. Shanks, “she would find that hard with me; for I am nearly bald on the top of my head.”

“And don’t you try something for it?” said the other blandly. Miss Mildmay was herself anxiously in search of “something” that might still restore to her, though changed in colour, the abundance of the locks of her youth.

“I try a cap for it,” said the other, “which covers everything up nicely. What the eye does not see the heart does not grieve—not like you, Ruth Mildmay, that have so much hair. Did you feel it standing up on end when you heard of Stella’s escapade?”

“I formed my opinion of Stella’s escapade long ago,” said Miss Mildmay. “I thought it mad—simply mad, like so many things she does; but I hoped nobody would take any notice, and I did not mean to be the first to say anything.”

“Well, it just shows how innocent I am,” said Mrs. Shanks, “an old married woman that ought to know better! Why, I never thought any harm of it at all! I thought they had just pushed off a bit, three young fools!”

“But why did they push off a bit—that is the question? They might have looked at the boat; but why should she go out, a girl with two men?”

“Well, two was better than one, surely, Ruth Mildmay! If it had been one, why, you might have said—but there’s safety in numbers—besides, one man in a little yacht with a big sail. I hate those things myself,” said Mrs. Shanks. “I would not put my foot in one of them to save my life. They are like guns which no one believes are ever loaded till they go off and kill you before you know.

"I have no objection to yachting, for my part. My Uncle Sir Ralph was a great yachtsman. I have often been out with him. The worst of these girls is that they've nobody to give them a little understanding of things—nobody that knows. Old Tredgold can buy anything for them, but he can't tell them how to behave. And even Katherine, you know——"

"Oh, Katherine—I have no patience with Katherine. She lets that little thing do whatever she pleases."

"As if any one could control Stella, a spoilt child if ever there was one! May I ask you, June Shanks, what you intend to do?"

"To do?" cried Mrs. Shanks, her face, which was a little red by nature, paling suddenly. She stopped short in the very act of cutting a dahlia, a large very double purple one, into which the usual colour of her cheeks seemed to have gone.

"Oh, for goodness' sake take care of those earwigs," cried Miss Mildmay. "I hate dahlias for that—they are always full of earwigs. When I was a little child I thought I had got one in my ear. You know the nursery-maids always say they go into your ear. And the miserable night I had! I have never forgotten it. There is one on the rails, I declare."

"Are we talking of earwigs—or of anything more important?" Mrs. Shanks cried.

"There are not many things more important, I can tell you, if you think one has got into your ear. They say it creeps into your brain and eats it up—and all sorts of horrible things. I was talking of going to the Cliff to see what those girls were about, and what Stella has to say for herself."

"To the Cliff!" Mrs. Shanks said.

"Well," said her neighbour sharply, "did you mean to give them up without even asking what they had to say for themselves?"

"I—give them up?—I never thought of such a thing. You go so fast, Ruth Mildmay. It was only yesterday I heard of this talk, which never should have gone from me. At the worst it's a thing that might be gossiped about; but to give them up——"

"You wouldn't, I suppose," said Miss Mildmay sternly, "countenance depravity—if it was proved to be true."

"If what was proved to be true? What is it they say against her?" Mrs. Shanks cried.

But this was not so easy to tell, for nobody had said anything except the fact which everybody knew.

"You know what is said as well as I do," said Miss Mildmay. "Are you going? Or do you intend to drop them? That is what I want to know."

"Has any one dropped them, yet?" her friend asked. There was a tremble in her hand which held the dahlias. She was probably scattering earwigs on every side, paying no attention. And her colour had not yet come back. It was very rarely that a question of this importance came up between the two neighbours. "Has Lady Jane said anything?" she asked in tones of awe.

"I don't know and I don't care," cried Miss Mildmay boldly; for, maiden lady as she was, and poor, she was one of those who did not give in to Lady Jane. "For my part, I want to hear more about it before I decide what to do."

"And so should I too," said Mrs. Shanks, though still with bated breath. "Oh, Ruth Mildmay, I do not think I could ever have the heart! Such a little thing, and no mother, and such a father as Mr. Tredgold! I think it is going to rain this afternoon. I should not mind for once having the midge if you will share it, and going to call, and see what we can see."

"I will share the midge if you like. I have other places where I must call. I can wait for you outside if you like, or I might even go in with you, for five minutes," Miss Mildmay said severely, as if the shortness of that term justified the impulse. And they drove out accordingly, in the slumbrous afternoon, when most people were composing themselves comfortably by the side of their newly-lighted fires, comforting themselves that, as it had come on to rain, nobody would call, and that they were quite free either to read a book or to nod over it till tea-time. It rained softly, persistently, quietly,

as the midge drove along amid a mingled shower of water-drops and falling leaves. The leaves were like bits of gold, the water-drops sparkled on the glass of the windows. All was soft, weeping, and downfall, the trees standing fast through the mild rain, scattering, with a sort of forlorn pleasure in it, their old glories off them. The midge stumbled along, jolting over the stones, and the old ladies seated opposite—for it held only one on each side—nodded their heads at each other, partly because they could not help it, partly to emphasise their talk. "That little thing! to have gone wrong at her age! But girls now were not like what they used to be—they were very different—not the least like what we used to be in our time."

"Here is the midge trundling along the drive and the old cats coming to inquire. They are sure to have heard everything that ever was said in the world," cried Stella, "and they are coming to stare at me and find out if I look as if I felt it. They shall not see me at all, however I look. I am not going to answer to them for what I do."

"Certainly not," said Katherine. "If that is what they have come for, you had better leave them to me."

"I don't know, either," said Stella, "it rains, and nobody else will come. They might be fun. I shall say everything I can think of to shock them, Kate."

"They deserve it, the old inquisitors," cried Kate, who was more indignant than her sister; "but I think I would not, Stella. Don't do anything unworthy of yourself, dear, whatever other people may say."

"Oh! unworthy of myself!—I don't know what's worthy of myself—nothing but nonsense, I believe. I should just like, however, for fun, to see what the old cats have to say."

The old cats came in, taking some time to alight from the midge and shake out their skirts in the hall. They were a little frightened, if truth must be told. They were not sure of their force against the sharp little claws sheathed in velvet of the little white cat-princess, on whom they were going to make an inquisition, whether there was any stain upon her coat of snow.

"We need not let them see we've come for that, or have heard anything," Mrs. Shanks whispered in Miss Mildmay's ear.

"Oh, I shall let them see!" said the fiercer visitor; but nevertheless she trembled too.

They were taken into the young ladies' room, which was on the ground floor, and opened with a large window upon the lawn and its encircling trees. It was perhaps too much on a level with that lawn for a house which is lived in in autumn and winter as well as summer, and the large window occupied almost one entire side of the room. Sometimes it was almost too bright, but to-day, with the soft persistent rain pouring down, and showers of leaves coming across the rain from time to time, as if flying frightened before every puff of air, the effect of the vast window and of the white and gold furniture was more dismal than bright. There was a wood fire, not very bright either, but hissing faintly as it smouldered, which did not add much to the comfort of the room. Katherine was working at something as usual—probably something of no importance—but it was natural to her to be occupied, while it was natural for Stella to do nothing. The visitors instinctively remarked the fact with the usual approval and disapproval.

"Katherine, how do you do, my dear? We thought we were sure to find you at home such a day. Isn't it a wet day? raining cats and dogs; but the midge is so good for that, one is so sheltered from the weather. Ruth Mildmay thought it was just the day to find you; Jane Shanks was certain you would be at home. Ah, Stella, you are here too!" they said both together.

"Did you think I shouldn't be here too?" said Stella. "I am always here too. I wonder why you should be surprised."

"Oh, indeed, Stella! We know that is not the case by any means. If you were always with Katherine, it would be very, very much the better for you. You would get into no scrapes if you kept close to Katherine," Mrs. Shanks said.

"Do I get into scrapes?" cried Stella, tossing her young head. "Oh, I knew there would be some fun when I saw the

midge coming along the drive! Tell me what scrapes I have got into. I hope it is a very bad one to-day to make your hair stand on end."

"My dear, you know a great deal better than we can tell you what things people are saying," said Miss Mildmay. "I did not mean to blurt it out the first thing as Jane Shanks has done. It is scarcely civil, I feel—perhaps you would yourself have been moved to give us some explanation which would have satisfied our minds—and to Katherine it is scarcely polite."

"Oh, please do not mind being polite to me!" cried Katherine, who was in a white heat of resentment and indignation, her hands trembling as she threw down her work. And Stella, that little thing, was completely at her ease! "If there is anything to be said I take my full share with Stella, whatever it may be." And then there was a little pause, for tea was brought in with a footman's instinct for the most dramatic moment. Tea singularly changed the face of affairs. Gossip may be exchanged over the teacups; but to come fully prepared for mortal combat, and in the midst of it to be served by your antagonist with a cup of tea, is terribly embarrassing. Katherine, being excited and innocent, would have left it there with its fragrance rising fruitlessly in the midst of the fury melting the assailants' hearts; but Stella, guilty and clever, saw her advantage. Before she said anything more she sprang up from her chair and took the place which was generally Katherine's before the little shining table. Mr. Tredgold's tea was naturally the very best that could be got for money, and had a fragrance which was delightful; and there were muffins in a beautiful little covered silver dish, though October is early in the season for muffins. "I'll give you some tea first," cried the girl, "and then you can come down upon me as much as you please."

And it was so nice after the damp drive, after the jolting of the midge, in the dull and dreary afternoon! It was more than female virtue was equal to, to refuse that deceiving cup. Miss Mildmay said faintly: "None for me, please. I am

going on to the——” But before she had ended this assertion she found herself, she knew not how, with a cup in her hand.

“Oh, Stella, my love,” cried Mrs. Shanks, “what tea yours is! And oh, how much sweeter you look, and how much better it is, instead of putting yourself in the way of a set of silly young officers, to sit there smiling at your old friends and pouring out the tea!”

Miss Mildmay gave a little gasp, and made a motion to put down the cup again, but she was not equal to the effort.

“Oh, it is the officers you object to!” cried Stella. “If it was curates perhaps you would like them better. I love the officers! they are so nice and big and silly. To be sure, curates are silly also, but they are not so easy and nice about it.”

Miss Mildmay’s gasp this time was almost like a choke. “Believe me,” she said, “it would be much better to keep clear of young men. You girls now are almost as bad as the American girls, that go about with them everywhere—worse, indeed, for it is permitted there, and it is not permitted here.”

“That makes it all the nicer,” cried Stella; “it’s delightful because it’s wrong. I wonder why the American girls do it when all the fun is gone out of it!”

“Depend upon it,” said Miss Mildmay, “it’s better to have nothing at all to do with young men.”

“But then what is to become of the world?” said the culprit gravely.

“Stella!” cried Katherine.

“It is quite true. The world would come to an end—there would be no more——”

“Stella, Stella!”

“I think you are quite right in what you said, Jane Shanks,” said Miss Mildmay. “It is a case that can’t be passed over. It is——”

“I never said anything of the sort,” cried Mrs. Shanks, alarmed. “I said we must know what Stella had to say for herself——”

"And so you shall," said Stella, with a toss of her saucy head. "I have as much as ever you like to say for myself. There is nothing I won't say. Some more muffin, Mrs. Shanks—one little other piece. It is so good, and the first of the season. But this is not enough toasted. Look after the tea, Katherine, while I toast this piece for Miss Mildmay. It is much nicer when it is toasted for you at a nice clear fire."

"Not any more for me," cried Miss Mildmay decisively, putting down her cup and pushing away her chair.

"You cannot refuse it when I have toasted it expressly for you. It is just as I know you like it, golden brown and hot! Why, here is another carriage! Take it, take it, dear Miss Mildmay, before some one else comes in. Who can be coming, Kate—this wet day?"

They all looked out eagerly, speechless, at the pair of smoking horses and dark green landau which passed close to the great window in the rain. Miss Mildmay took the muffin mechanically, scarcely knowing what she did, and a great consternation fell upon them all. The midge outside, frightened, drew away clumsily from the door, and the ladies, both assailed and assailants, gazed into each other's eyes with a shock almost too much for speech.

"Oh, heavens," breathed Mrs. Shanks, "do you see who it is, you unfortunate children? It is Lady Jane herself—and how are you going to stand up, you little Stella, before Lady Jane?"

"Let her come," said Stella defiant, yet with a hot flush on her cheeks.

And, indeed, so it happened. Lady Jane did not pause to shake out her skirts, which were always short enough for all circumstances. Almost before the footman, who preceded her with awe, could open the door decorously, she pushed him aside with her own hand to quicken his movements, Lady Jane herself marched squarely into the expectant room.

CHAPTER IX.

LADY JANE walked into the room squarely, with her short skirts and her close jacket. She looked as if she were quite ready to walk back the four miles of muddy road between her house and the Cliff. And so indeed she was, though she had no intention of doing so to-day. She came in, pushing aside the footman, as I have said, who was very much frightened of Lady Jane. When she saw the dark figures of Mrs. Shanks and Miss Mildmay sitting against the large light of the window, she uttered a suppressed sound of discontent. It might be translated by an "Oh," or it might be translated, as we so often do as the symbol of a sound, by a "Humph." At all events, it was a sound which expressed annoyance. "You here!" it seemed to say; but Lady Jane afterwards shook hands with them very civilly, it need not be said. For the two old cats were very respectable members of society, and not to be badly treated even by Lady Jane.

"That was your funny little carriage, I suppose," she said, when she had seated herself, "stopping the way."

"Was it stopping the way?" cried Mrs. Shanks, "the midge? I am astonished at Mr. Perkins. We always give him the most careful instructions; but if he had found one of the servants to gossip with, he is a man who forgets everything one may say."

"I can't undertake what his motives were, but he was in the way, blocking up the doors," said Lady Jane; "all the more astonishing to my men and my horses, as they were brought out, much against their will, on the full understanding that nobody else would be out on such a day."

"It is a long way to Steephill," said Miss Mildmay, "so

that we could not possibly have known Lady Jane's intentions, could we, Jane Shanks? or else we might have taken care not to get into her way."

"Oh, the public roads are free to every one," said Lady Jane, dismissing the subject. "What rainy weather we have had, to be sure! Of course you are all interested in that bazaar; if it goes on like this you will have no one, not a soul to buy; and all the expense of the decorations and so forth on our hands."

"Oh, the officers will come over from Newport," said Miss Mildmay; "anything is better than nothing. Whatever has a show of amusement will attract the officers, and that will make the young ladies happy, so that it will not be thrown away."

"What a Christian you are!" said Lady Jane. "You mean it is an ill wind that blows nobody good. I have several cousins in the garrison, but I don't think I should care so much for their amusement as all that."

"Was there ever a place," said Mrs. Shanks, with a certain tone of humble admiration, which grated dreadfully upon her companion, "in which you had not a number of cousins, Lady Jane? They say the Scotch are the great people for having relatives everywhere, and my poor husband was a Scotchman; but I'm sure he had not half so many as you."

Lady Jane answered curtly with a nod of her head and went on. "The rain is spoiling everything," she said. "The men, of course, go out in spite of it when they can, but they have no pleasure in their work, and to have a shooting party on one's hands in bad weather is a hard task. They look at you as if it were your fault, as if you could order good weather as easily as you can order luncheon for them at the cover side."

"Dear me, that is not at all fair, is it, Ruth Mildmay? In my poor husband's lifetime, when we used to take a shooting regularly, I always said to his friends, 'Now, don't look reproachfully at me if it's bad weather. We can't guarantee

the weather. You ought to get so many brace if you have good luck. We'll answer for that."

"You were a bold woman," said Lady Jane; "so many brace without knowing if they could fire a gun or not! That's a rash promise. Sir John is not so bold as that, I can tell you. He says, 'There's a bird or two about if you can hit 'em.' Katherine, you may as well let me see those things of yours for my stall. It will amuse me a little this wet day."

"They are all upstairs, Lady Jane."

"Well, I'll go upstairs. Oh, don't let me take you away from your visitors. Stella, you can come with me and show them; not that I suppose you know anything about them."

"Not the least in the world," said Stella very clearly. Her face, so delicately tinted usually, and at present paler than ordinary, was crimson, and her attitude one of battle. She could propitiate and play with the old cats, but she dare not either cajole or defy Lady Jane.

"Then Katherine can come, and I can enjoy the pleasure of conversation with you after. Shall I find you still here," said Lady Jane, holding out her hand graciously to the other ladies, "when I come downstairs again?"

"Oh, we must be going——"

Mrs. Shanks was interrupted by Miss Mildmay's precise tones. "Probably you will find *me* here, Lady Jane; and I am sure it will be a mutual pleasure to continue the conversation which——"

"Then I needn't say good-bye," said the great lady calmly, taking Katherine by the arm and pushing the girl before her. Stella stood with her shoulders against the mantel-piece, very red, watching them as they disappeared. She gave the others an angry look of appeal as the door closed upon the more important visitor.

"Oh, I wish you'd take me away with you in the midge!" she cried.

"Ah, Stella," cried Mrs. Shanks, shaking her head, "the times I have heard you making your fun of the midge! But in a time of trouble one finds out who are one's real friends."

Miss Mildmay was softened too, but she was not yet disposed to give in. She had not been able to eat that special muffin which Stella had re-toasted for her. Lady Jane, in declining tea curtly with a wave of her hands, had made the tea-drinkers uncomfortable, and especially had arrested the eating of muffins, which it is difficult to consume with dignity unless you have the sympathy of your audience. It was cold now, quite cold and unappetizing. It lay in its little plate with the air of a thing rejected. And Miss Mildmay felt it was not consistent with her position to ask even for half a cup of hot tea.

"It has to be seen," she said stiffly, "what friends will respond to the appeal; everybody is not at the disposal of the erring person when and how she pleases. I must draw a line——"

"What do you say I have done, then?" cried Stella, flushing with lively wrath. "Do you think I went out in that boat on purpose to be drowned or catch my death? Do you think I wanted to be ill and sea-sick and make an exhibition of myself before two men? Do you think I wanted them to see me *ill*? Goodness!" cried Stella, overcome at once by the recollection and the image, "could you like a man—especially if he was by way of admiring you, and talking nonsense to you and all that—to see you *ill* at sea? If you can believe that you can believe anything, and there is no more for me to say."

The force of this argument was such that Miss Mildmay was quite startled out of her usual composure and reserve. She stared at Stella for a moment with wide-opened eyes.

"I did not think of that," she said in a tone of sudden conviction. "There is truth in what you say—certainly there is truth in what you say."

"Truth in it!" cried the girl. "If you had only seen me—but I am very thankful you didn't see me—leaning over the side of that dreadful boat, not minding what waves went over me! When you were a girl and had men after you, oh, Miss Mildmay, I ask you, would you have chosen to have them to see you *then*?"

Miss Mildmay put the plate with the cold muffin off her knees. She set down her empty cup. She felt the solemnity of the appeal.

"No," she said, "if you put it to me like that, Stella, I am obliged to allow I should not. And I may add," she went on, looking round the room as if to a contradictory audience, "I don't know any woman who would; and that is my opinion, whatever anybody may say." She paused a moment with a little triumphant air of having conducted to a climax a potent argument, looking round upon the baffled opponents. And then she came down from that height and added in soft tones of affectionate reproach: "But why did you go out with them at all, Stella? When I was a girl, as you say, and had—I never, never should have exposed myself to such risks, by going out in a boat with——"

"Oh, Miss Mildmay," cried Stella, "girls were better in your time. You have always told us so. They were not perhaps so fond of—fun; they were in better order; they had more—more——" said the girl, fishing for a word, which Mrs. Shanks supplied her with by a movement of her lips behind Miss Mildmay's back—"disciplined minds," Stella said with an outburst of sudden utterance which was perilously near a laugh.

"And you had a mother, Ruth Mildmay?" said the plotter behind, in tender notes.

"Yes; I had a mother—an excellent mother, who would not have permitted any of the follies I see around me. Jane Shanks, you have conquered me with that word. Stella, my dear, count on us both to stand by you, should that insolent woman upstairs take anything upon her. Who is Lady Jane, I should like to know? The daughter of a new-made man—coals, or beer, or something! A creation of this reign! Stella, this will teach you, perhaps, who are your true friends."

And Miss Mildmay extended her arms and took the girl to her bosom. Stella had got down on her knees for some reason of her own, which girls who are fond of throwing themselves about may understand, and therefore was within reach

of this unexpected embrace, and I am afraid laughed rather than sobbed on Miss Mildmay's lap; but the slight heaving of her shoulders in that position had the same effect, and sealed the bargain. The two ladies lingered a little after this, hoping that Lady Jane might come down. At least Miss Mildmay hoped so. Mrs. Shanks would have stolen humbly out to get into the midge at a little distance along the drive, not to disturb the big landau with the brown horses which stood large before the door. But Miss Mildmay would have none of that; she ordered the landau off with great majesty, and waved her hand indignantly for Perkins to "come round," as if the midge had been a chariot, a manoeuvre which Stella promoted eagerly, standing in the doorway to see her visitors off with the most affectionate interest, while the other carriage paced sullenly up and down.

In the meantime Lady Jane had nearly completed her interview with Katherine in the midst of the large assortment of trumpery set out in readiness for the bazaar. "Oh, yes, I suppose they'll do well enough," she said, turning over the many coloured articles into which the Sliplin ladies had worked so many hours of their lives with careless hands. "Mark them cheap; the people here like to have bargains, and I'm sure they're not worth much. Of course, it was not the bazaar things I was thinking of. Tell me, Katherine, what is all this about Stella? I find the country ringing with it. What has she done to have her name mixed up with Charlie Somers and Algy Scott—two of the fastest men one knows? What has the child been doing? And how did she come to know these men?"

"She has been doing nothing, Lady Jane. It is the most wicked invention. I can tell you exactly how it happened. A little yacht was lying in the harbour, and they went up to papa's observatory, as he calls it, to look at it through his telescope, and papa himself was there, and he said——"

"But this is going very far back, surely? I asked you what Stella was doing with these men."

"And I am telling you," cried Katherine, red with indig-

nation. "Papa said it was his yacht, which he had just bought, and they began to argue and bet about who it was from whom he had bought it, and he would not tell them; and then Stella said——"

"My dear Katherine, this elaborate explanation begins to make me fear——"

"Stella cried: 'Come down and look at it, while Kate orders tea.' You know how careless she is, and how she orders me about. They ran down by our private gate. It was to settle their bet, and I had tea laid out for them—it was quite warm then—under the trees. Well," said Katherine, pausing to take breath, "the first thing I saw was a white sail moving round under the cliff while I sat waiting for them to come back. And then papa came down screaming that it was the *Stella*, his yacht, and that a gale was blowing up. And then we spent the most dreadful evening, and darkness came on and we lost sight of the sail, and I thought I should have died and that it would kill papa."

Her breath went from her with this rapid narrative, uttered at full speed to keep Lady Jane from interrupting. What with indignation and what with alarm, the quickening of her heart was such that Katherine could say no more. She stopped short and stood panting, with her hand upon her heart.

"And at what hour," said Lady Jane icily, "did they come back?"

"Oh, I can't tell what hour it was. It seemed years and years to me. I got her back in a faint and wet to the skin, half dead with sickness and misery and cold. Oh, my poor, poor little girl! And now here are wicked and cruel people saying it is her fault. Her fault to risk her life and make herself ill and drive us out of our senses, papa and me!"

"Oh, Stella would not care very much for her papa and you, so long as she got her fun. So it was as bad as that, was it—a whole night at sea along with these two men? I could not have imagined any girl would have been such a fool."

"I will not hear my sister spoken of so. It was the men who were fools, or worse, taking her out when a gale was ris-

ing. What did she know about the signs of a gale? She thought of nothing but two minutes in the bay, just to see how the boat sailed. It was these men."

"What is the use of saying anything about the men? I dare say they enjoyed it thoroughly. It doesn't do them any harm. Why should they mind? It is the girl who ought to look out, for it is she who suffers. Good Heavens, to think that any girl should be such a reckless little fool!"

"Stella has done nothing to be spoken of in that way."

"Oh, don't speak to me!" said Lady Jane. "Haven't I taken you both up and done all I could to give you your chance, you two? And this is my reward. Stella has done nothing? Why, Stella has just compromised herself in the most dreadful way. You know what sort of a man Charlie Somers is? No, you don't, of course. How should you, not living in a set where you were likely to hear? That's the worst, you know, of going out a little in one *monde* and belonging to another all the time."

"I don't know what you mean, Lady Jane," cried Katherine, on the edge of tears.

"No; there's no need you should know what I mean. A girl, in another position, that got to know Charlie Somers would have known more or less what he was. You, of course, have the disadvantages of both—acquaintance and then ignorance. Who introduced Charlie Somers to your sister? The blame lies on her first of all."

"It was—they were all—at the hotel, and Stella thought it would be kind to ask Mrs. Seton to a picnic we were giving——"

"Lottie Seton!" cried Lady Jane, sitting down in the weakness of her consternation. "Why, this is the most extraordinary thing of all!"

"I see nothing extraordinary in the whole business," said Katherine, in a lofty tone.

"Oh, my dear Katherine, for goodness' sake don't let me have any more of your innocent little-girlishness. Of course you see nothing! You have no eyes, no sense, no—— Lot-

the Seton!—she to give over two of her own men to a pretty, silly, reckless little thing like Stella, just the kind for them! Well, that is the last thing I should have expected. Why, Lottie Seton is nothing without her tail. If they abandon her she is lost. She is asked to places because she is always sure to be able to bring a few men. What they can see in her nobody knows, but there it is—that's her faculty. And she actually gave over two of her very choicest——"

"You must excuse me, Lady Jane," said Katherine, "if I don't want to hear any more of Mrs. Seton and her men. They are exceedingly rude, stupid, disagreeable men. You may think it a fine thing for us to be elevated to the sphere in which we can meet men like Sir Charles Somers. I don't think so. I think he is detestable. I think he believes women to exist only for the purpose of amusing him and making him laugh, like an idiot, as he is!"

Lady Jane sat in her easy-chair and looked sardonically at the passion of the girl, whose face was crimson, whose voice was breaking. She was, with that horrible weakness which a high-spirited girl so resents in herself, so near an outbreak of crying that she could scarcely keep the tears within her eyes. The elder lady looked at her for some time in silence. The sight troubled her a little, and amused her a little also. It occurred to her to say, "You are surely in love with him yourself," which was her instinct, but for once forbore, out of a sort of awed sense that here was a creature who was outside of her common rules.

"He is not an idiot, however," she said at last. "I don't say he is intellectual. He does think, perhaps, that women exist, &c. So do most of them, my dear. You will soon find that out if you have anything to do with men. Still, for a good little girl, I have always thought you were nice, Katherine. It is for your sake more than hers that I feel inclined to do that silly little Stella a good turn. How could she be such a little fool? Has she lived on this cliff half her life and doesn't know when a gale's coming on? The more shame to her, then! And I don't doubt that instead of being ashamed

she is quite proud of her adventure. And I hear, to make things worse, that Algy Scott went and caught a bad cold over it. That will make his mother and all her set furious with the girl, and say everything about her. He's not going to die—that's a good thing. If he had, she need never have shown her impertinent little nose anywhere again. Lady Scott's an inveterate woman. It will be bad enough as it is. How are we to get things set right again?"

"It is a pity you should take any trouble," said Katherine; "things are quite right, thank you. We have quite enough in what you call our own *monde*."

"Well, and what do you find to object to in the word? It is a very good word; the French understand that sort of thing better than we do. So you have quite enough to make you happy in your own *monde*? I don't think so—and I know the world in general better than you do. And, what is more, I am very doubtful indeed whether Stella thinks so."

"Oh, no," cried a little voice, and Stella, running in, threw herself down at Lady Jane's feet, in the caressing attitude which she had so lately held in spite of herself at Miss Mildmay's. "Stella doesn't think so at all. Stella will be miserable if you don't take her up and put things right for her, dear Lady Jane. I have been a dreadful little fool. I know it, I know it; but I didn't mean it. I meant nothing but a little—fun. And now there is nobody who can put everything right again but you, and only you."

CHAPTER X.

LADY JANE THURSTON was a fine lady in due place and time ; but on other occasions she was a robust countrywoman, ready to walk as sturdily as any man, or to undertake whatever athletic exercise was necessary. When she had gone downstairs again, and been served with a cup of warm tea (now those old cats were gone), she sent her carriage off that the horses might be put under shelter, not to speak of the men, and walked herself in the rain to the hotel, where the two young men were still staying, Captain Scott being as yet unable to be moved. It was one of those hotels which are so pretty in summer, all ivy and clematis, and balconies full of flowers. But on a wet day in October it looked squalid and damp, with its open doorway traversed by many muddy footsteps, and the wreaths of the withered creepers hanging limp about the windows. Lady Jane knew everybody about, and took in them all the interest which a member of the highest class—quite free from any doubt about her position—is able to take with so much more ease and naturalness than any other. The difference between the Tredgolds, for instance, and Mrs. Black of the hotel in comparison with herself was but slightly marked in her mind. She was impartially kind to both. The difference between them was but one of degree ; she herself was of so different a species that the gradations did not count. In consequence of this she was more natural with the Blacks at the hotel than Katherine Tredgold, though in her way a Lady Boantiful, and universal friend, could ever have been. She was extremely interested to hear of Mrs. Black's baby, which had come most inopportunately, with a sick gentleman in the house, at least a fortnight before it was expected, and went upstairs to see the

mother and administer a word or two of rebuke to the precipitate infant before she proceeded on her own proper errand. "Silly little thing, to rush into this rain sooner than it could help," she said, "but mind you don't do the same, my dear woman. Never trouble your head about the sick gentleman. Don't stir till you have got up your strength." And then she marched along the passages to the room in which Algy and Charlie sat, glum and tired to death, looking out at the dull sky and the raindrops on the window. They had invented a sort of sport with those same raindrops, watching them as they ran down and backing one against the other. There had just been a close race, and Algy's man had won to his great delight, when Lady Jane's sharp knock came to the door; so that she went in to the sound of laughter peeling forth from the sick gentleman in such a manner as to reassure any anxious visitor as to the state of his lungs, at least.

"Well, you seem cheerful enough," Lady Jane said.

"Making the best of it," said Captain Scott.

"How do, Lady Jane? I say, Algy, there's another starting. Beg pardon, too excitin' to stop. Ten to one on the little fellow. By George, looks as if he knew it, don't he now! Done this time, old man——"

"Never took it," said Algy, with a kick directed at his friend. "Shut up! It's awfully kind of you coming to see a fellow—in such weather—Lady Jane!"

"Yes," she said composedly, placing herself in the easiest chair. "It would be kind if I had come without a motive—but I don't claim that virtue. How are you, by the way? Better, I hope."

"Awfully well—as fit as a——, but they won't let me budge in this weather. I've got a nurse that lords it over me, and the doctor, don't you know?—daren't stir, not to save my life."

"And occupying your leisure with elevating pastimes," said Lady Jane.

"Don't be hard on a man when he's down—nothing to do," said Sir Charles. "Desert island sort of thing—Algy

educating mouse, and that sort of thing; hard lines upon me."

"Does he know enough?" said Lady Jane with a polite air of inquiry. "I am glad to find you both," she added, "and not too busy evidently to give me your attention. How did you manage, Algy, to catch such a bad cold?"

"Pneumonia, by Jove," the young man cried, inspired by so inadequate a description,

"Well, pneumonia—so much the worse—and still more foolish for you who have a weak chest. How did you manage to do it? I wonder if your mother knows, and why is it I don't find her here at your bedside?"

"I say, don't tell her, Lady Jane; it's bad enough being shut up here, without making more fuss, and the whole thing spread all over the place."

"What is the whole thing?" said Lady Jane.

"Went out in a bit of a yacht," said Sir Charles, "clear up a bet, that was why we did it. Caught in a gale—my fault, not Algy's—says he saw it coming—I——"

"You were otherwise occupied, Charlie——"

"Shut up!" Sir Charles was the speaker this time, with a kick in the direction of his companion in trouble.

"I am glad to see you've got some grace left," said Lady Jane. "Not you, Algy, you are beyond that—I know all about it, however. It was little Stella Tredgold who ran away with you—or you with her."

Algy burst into a loud laugh. Sir Charles on his part said nothing, but pulled his long moustache.

"Which is it? And what were the rights of it? and was there any meaning in it? or merely fun, as you call it in your idiotic way?"

"By Jove!" was all the remark the chief culprit made. Algy on his sofa kicked up his feet and roared again.

"Please don't think," said Lady Jane, "that I am going to pick my words to please you. I never do it, and especially not to a couple of boys whom I have known since ever they were born, and before that. What do you mean by it, if it is

you, Charlie Somers? I suppose, by Algy's laugh, that he is not the chief offender this time. You know as well as I do that you're not a man to take little girls about. I suppose you must have sense enough to know that, whatever good opinion you may have of yourself. Stella Tredgold may be a little fool, but she's a girl I have taken up, and I don't mean to let her be compromised. A girl that knew anything would have known better than to mix up her name with yours. Now what is the meaning of it? You will just be so good as to inform me."

"Why, Cousin Jane, it was all the little thing herself."

"Shut up!" said Sir Charles again, with another kick at Algy's foot.

"Well!" said Lady Jane, very magisterially. No judge upon the bench could look more alarming than she. It is true that her short skirts, her strong walking shoes, her very severest hat and stiff feather that would bear the rain, were not so impressive as flowing wigs and robes. She had not any of the awe-inspiring trappings of the Law; but she was law all the same, the law of society, which tolerates a great many things, and is not very nice about motives nor forbidding as to details, but yet draws the line—if capriciously—sometimes, yet very definitely, between what can and what cannot be done.

"Well," came at length hesitatingly through the culprit's big moustache. "Don't know, really—have got anything to say—no meaning at all. Bet to clear up—him and me; then sudden thought—just ten minutes—try the sails. No harm in that, Lady Jane," he said, more briskly, recovering courage, "afterwards gale came on; no responsibility," he cried, throwing up his hands.

"Fact it was she that was the keenest. I shan't shut up," cried Algy; "up to anything, that little thing is. Never minded a bit till it got very bad, and then gave in; but never said a word. No fault of anybody, that is the truth. But turned out badly—for me——"

"And worse for her," said Lady Jane—"that is, without me; all the old cats will be down upon the girl" (which was

not true, the reader knows). "She is a pretty girl, Charlie."

Sir Charles, though he was so experienced a person, coloured faintly and gave a nod of his head.

"Stunner, by Jove!" said Algy, "though I like the little plain one better," he added in a parenthesis.

"And a very rich girl, Sir Charles," Lady Jane said.

This time a faint "O—Oh" came from under the big moustache.

"A *very* rich girl. The father is an old curmudgeon, but he is made of money, and he adores his little girl. I believe he would buy a title for her high and think it cheap."

"Oh, I say!" exclaimed Sir Charles, with a colour more pronounced upon his cheek.

"Yours is not anything very great in that way," said the remorseless person on the bench, "but still it's what he would call a title, you know; and I haven't the least doubt he would come down very handsomely. Old Tredgold knows very well what he is about."

"Unexpected," said Sir Charles, "sort of serious jaw like this. Put it off, if you don't mind, till another time."

"No time like the present," said Lady Jane. "Your father was a great friend of mine, Charlie Somers. He once proposed to me—very much left to himself on that occasion, you will say—but still it's true. So I might have been your mother, don't you see. I know your age, therefore, to a day. You are a good bit past thirty, and you have been up to nothing but mischief all your life."

"Oh, I say now!" exclaimed Sir Charles again.

"Well, now here is a chance for you. Perhaps I began without thinking, but now I'm in great earnest. Here is really a chance for you. Stella's not so nice as her sister, as Algy there (I did not expect it of him) has the sense to see: but she's much more in your way. She is just your kind, a reckless little hot-headed—all for pleasure and never a thought of to-morrow. But that sort of thing is not so risky when you have a good fortune behind you, well tied down. Now,

Charlie, listen to me. Here is a capital chance for you; a man at your age, if he is ever going to do anything, should stop playing the fool. These boys even will soon begin to think you an old fellow. Oh, you needn't cry out! I know generations of them, and I understand their ways. A man should stop taking his fling before he gets to thirty-five. Why, Algy there would tell you that, if he had the spirit to speak up."

"I'm out of it," said Algy. "Say whatever you like, it has nothing to do with me."

"You see," said Lady Jane, with a little flourish of her hand, "the boy doesn't contradict me; he daren't contradict me, for it's truth. Now, as I say, here's a chance for you, Abundance of money, and a very pretty girl, whom you like." She made a pause here to emphasise her words. "Whom—you—like. Oh, I know very well what I'm saying. I am going to ask her over to Steephill and you can come too if you please; and if you don't take advantage of your opportunities, Sir Charles, why you have less sense than even I have given you credit for, and that is a great deal to say."

"Rather public, don't you think, for this sort of thing? Go in and win, before admiring audience. Don't relish exhibition. Prefer own way."

This Sir Charles said, standing at the window, gazing out, apparently insensible even of the raindrops, and turning his back upon his adviser.

"Well, take your own way. I don't mind what way you take, so long as you take my advice, which is given in your very best interests, I can tell you. Isn't the regiment ordered out to India, Algy?" she said, turning quickly upon the other. "And what do you mean to do?"

"Go, of course," he said—"the very thing for me, they say. And I'm not going to shirk either; see some sport probably out there."

"And Charlie?" said Lady Jane. There was no apparent connection between her previous argument and this question, yet the very distinct staccato manner in which she said these words called the attention.

Sir Charles, still standing by the window with his back to Lady Jane, once more muttered, "By Jove!" under his breath, or under his moustache, which came to the same thing.

"Oh, Charlie! He'll exchange, I suppose, and get out of it, too great a swell for India, he is. And how could he live out of reach of Pall Mall?"

"Well, I hope you'll soon be able to move, my dear boy; if the weather keeps mild and the rain goes off you had better come up to Steephill for a few days to get up your strength."

"Thanks, awfully," said Captain Scott. "I will with pleasure; and Cousin Jane, if that little prim one should be there——"

"She shan't, not for you, my young man, you have other things to think of. As for Charlie, I shall say no more to him; he can come too if he likes, but not unless he likes. Send me a line to let me know."

Sir Charles accompanied the visitor solemnly downstairs, but without saying anything until they reached the door, where to his surprise no carriage was waiting.

"Don't mean to say you walked—day like this?" he cried.

"No; but the horses and the men are more used to take care of themselves; they are to meet me at the Rectory. I am going there about this ridiculous bazaar. You can walk with me, if you like," she said.

He seized a cap from the stand and loinged out after her into the rain. "I say—don't you know?" he said, but paused there and added no more.

"Get it out," said Lady Jane.

After a while, as he walked along by her side, his hands deep in his pockets, the rain soaking pleasantly into his thick tweed coat, he resumed: "Unexpected serious sort of jaw that, before little beggar like Algy—laughs at everything."

"There was no chance of speaking to you alone," said Lady Jane almost apologetically.

"Suppose not. Don't say see my way to it. Don't deny, though—reason in it."

"And inclination, eh? not much of one without the other, if I am any judge."

"First-rate judge, by Jove!" Sir Charles said.

And he added no more. But when he took leave of Lady Jane at the Rectory he took a long walk by himself in the rain, skirting the gardens of the Cliff and getting out upon the downs beyond, where the steady downfall penetrated into him, soaking the tweed in a kind of affectionate natural way as of a material prepared for the purpose. He strolled along with his hands in his pockets and the cap over his eyes as if it had been a summer day, liking it all the better for the wetness and the big masses of the clouds and the leaden monotone of the sea. It was all so dismal that it gave him a certain pleasure; he seemed all the more free to think of his own concerns, to consider the new panorama opened before him, which perhaps, however, was not so new as Lady Jane supposed. She had forced open the door and made him look in, giving all the details; but he had been quite conscious that it had been there before, within his reach, awaiting his inspection. There were a great many inducements, no doubt, to make that fantastic prospect real if he could. He did not want to go to India, though indeed it would have been very good for him in view of his sadly reduced finances and considerably affected credit in both senses of that word. He had not much credit at headquarters, that he knew; he was not what people called a good officer. No doubt he would have been brave enough had there been fighting to do, and he was not disliked by his men, his character of a "careless beggar" being quite as much for good as for evil among those partial observers; but his credit in higher regions was not great. Credit in the other sense of the word was a little failing too, tradesmen having a wonderful *flair* as to a man's resources and the rising and falling of his account at his bankers. It would do him much good to go to India and devote himself to his profession; but then he did not want to go. Was it last of all or first of all that another motive came in, little Stella herself to wit, though she broke down so much in her attempts to imitate Lottie Seton's

ways, and was not amusing at all in that point of view? Stella had perhaps behaved better on that impromptu yachting trip than she was herself aware. Certainly she was far more guilty in the beginning of it than she herself allowed. But when the night was dark and the storm high, she had—what had she done? Behaved very well and made the men admire her pluck, or behaved very badly and frightened them—I cannot tell; anyhow, she had been very natural, she had done and said only what it came into her head to say and to do, without any affectation or thought of effect; and the sight of the little girl, very silly and yet so entirely herself, scolding them, upbraiding them, though she was indeed the most to blame, yet bearing her punishment not so badly after all and not without sympathy for them, had somehow penetrated Charles Somers' very hardened heart. She was a nice little girl—she was a very pretty little girl—she was a creature one would not tire of even if she was not amusing like Lottie Seton. If a man was to have anything more to do with her, it was to be hoped she never would be amusing like Lottie Seton. He paced along the downs he never knew how long, pondering these questions; but he was not a man very good at thinking. In the end he came to no more than a very much strengthened conviction that Stella Tredgold was a very pretty little girl.

CHAPTER XI.

IT shut the mouths of all the gossips, or rather it afforded a new but less exciting subject of comment, when it was known that Stella Tredgold had gone off on a visit to Steephill. I am not sure that Mrs. Shanks and Miss Mildmay did not feel themselves deceived a little. They had pledged themselves to Stella's championship in a moment of enthusiasm, stimulated thereto by a strong presumption of the hostility of Lady Jane. Miss Mildmay in particular had felt that she had a foe man worthy of her steel, and that it would be an enterprise worth her while to bring the girl out with flying colours from any boycotting or unfriendly action directed by the great lady of the district; and to find that Stella had been taken immediately under Lady Jane's wing disturbed her composure greatly. There was great talk over the railing between the ladies, and even, as it became a little too cold for these outdoor conferences, in the drawing-rooms in both houses, under the shade of the verandah which made these apartments a little dark and gloomy at this season of the year. But I must not occupy the reader's time with any account of these talks, for as a matter of fact the ladies had committed themselves and given their promise, which, though offended, they were too high-minded to take back. It conduced, however, to a general cooling of the atmosphere about them, that what everybody in Sliplin and the neighbourhood now discussed was not Stella's escapade, but Stella's visit to Steephill, where there was a large party assembled, and where her accomplices in that escapade were to be her fellow-guests. What did this mean was now the question demanded? Had Lady Jane any intentions in respect to Stella? Was there "anything between" her and either of

these gentlemen? But this was a question to which no one as yet had any reply.

Stella herself was so much excited by the prospect that all thought of the previous adventure died out of her mind. Save at a garden party, she had never been privileged to enter Lady Jane's house except on the one occasion when she and Katherine stayed all night after a ball; and then there were many girls besides themselves, and no great attention paid to them. But to be the favoured guest, almost the young lady of the house, among a large company was a very different matter. Telegrams flew to right and left—to dressmakers, milliners, glovers, and I don't know how many more. Stevers, the maid, whom at present she shared with Katherine, but who was, of course, to accompany her to Steephill as her own separate attendant, was despatched to town after the telegrams with more detailed and close instructions. The girl shook off all thought both of her own adventure and of her companions in it. She already felt herself flying at higher game. There was a nephew of Lady Jane's, a young earl, who, it was known, was there, a much more important personage than any trumpy baronet. This she informed her father, to his great delight, as he gave her his paternal advice with much unction the evening before she went away.

"That's right, Stella," he said, "always fly at the highest—and them that has most money. This Sir Charles, I wager you anything, he is after you for your fortune. I dare say he hasn't a penny. He thinks he can come and hang up his hat and nothing more to do all his life. But he'll find he's a bit mistaken with me."

"It isn't very nice of you, papa," said Stella, "to think I am only run after because I have money—or because you have money, for not much of it comes to me."

"Ain't she satisfied with her allowance?" said the old gentleman, looking over Stella's head at her elder sister. "It's big enough. Your poor mother would have dressed herself and me and the whole family off half of what that little thing gets through. It is a deal better the money should

be in my hands, my pet. And if any man comes after you, you may take your oath he shan't have you cheap. He'll have to put down shillin' for shillin', I can tell you. You find out which is the one that has the most money, and go for him. Bad's the best among all them new earls and things, but keep your eyes open, Stella, and mark the one that's best off." Here he gave utterance to a huge chuckle. "Most people would think she would never find that out; looks as innocent as a daisy, don't she, Katie? But she's got the old stuff in her all the same."

"I don't know what you call the old stuff," said Stella, indignant; "it must be very nasty stuff. What does your horrid money do for me? I have not half enough to dress on, and you go over my bills with your spectacles as if I were Simmons, the cook. If you had a chest full of diamonds and rubies, and gave us a handful now and then, that is the kind of richness I should like; but I have no jewels at all," cried the girl, putting up her hand to her neck, which was encircled by a modest row of small pearls; "and they will all be in their diamonds and things."

Mr. Tredgold's countenance fell a little. "Is that true?" he said. "Katie, is that true?"

"Girls are not expected to wear diamonds," said Katie; "at least, I don't think so, papa."

"Oh, what does she know? That's all old-fashioned nowadays. Girls wear just whatever they can get to wear, and why shouldn't girls wear diamonds? Don't you think I should set them off better than Lady Jane, papa?" cried Stella, tossing her young head.

Mr. Tredgold was much amused by this question; he chuckled and laughed over it till he nearly lost his breath. "All the difference between parchment and white satin, ain't there, Katie? Well, I don't say as you mightn't have some diamonds. They're things that always keep their value. It's not a paying investment, but, anyhow, you're sure of your capital. They don't wear out, don't diamonds. So that's what you're after, Miss Stella. Just you mind what you're

about, and don't send me any young fool without a penny in his pocket, but a man that can afford to keep you like you've been kept all your life. And I'll see about the jewels," Mr. Tredgold said.

The consequence of this conversation was that little Stella appeared at Steephill, notwithstanding her vapoury and girl-ish toilettes of white chiffon and other such airy fabrics, with a *rivière* of diamonds sparkling round her pretty neck, which, indeed, did them much greater justice than did Lady Jane. Ridiculous for a little girl, all the ladies said—but yet impressive more or less, and suggestive of illimitable wealth on the part of the foolish old man, who, quite unaware what was suitable, bedizened his little daughter like that. And Stella was excited by her diamonds and by the circumstances, and the fact that she was the youngest there, and the most fun; for who would expect fun from portly matrons or weather-beaten middle age, like Lady Jane's? To do her justice, she never or hardly ever thought, as she might very well have done, that she was the prettiest little person in the party. On the contrary, she was a little disposed to be envious of Lady Mary, the niece of Lady Jane and sister of the Earl, who was not pretty in the least, but who was tall, and had a figure which all the ladies' maids, including Stevens, admired much. "Oh, if you only was as tall as Lady Mary, Miss Stella," Stevens said. "Oh, I wish as you had that kind of figger—her waist ain't more than eighteen inches, for all as she's so tall." Stella had felt nearly disposed to cry over her inferiority. She was as light as a feather in her round and blooming youth, but she was not so slim as Lady Mary. It was a consolation to be able to say to herself that at least she was more fun.

Lady Mary, it turned out, was not fun at all; neither most surely was the young Earl. He talked to Stella, whom, and her diamonds, he approached gravely, feeling that the claims of beauty were as real as those of rank or personal importance, and that the qualification of youth was as worthy of being taken into consideration as that of age, for he was a philoso-

pher about University Extension, and the great advantage it was to the lower classes to share the culture of those above them.

"Oh, I am sure I am not cultured at all," cried Stella. "I am as ignorant as a goose. I can't spell any big words, or do any of the things that people do."

"You must not expect to take me in with professions of ignorance," said the Earl with a smile. "I know how ladies read, and how much they do nowadays—perhaps in a different way from us, but just as important."

"Oh, no, no," cried Stella; "it is quite true, I can't spell a bit," and her eyes and her diamonds sparkled, and a certain radiance of red and white, sheen of satin, and shimmer of curls, and fun and audacity, and youth, made a sort of atmosphere round her, by which the grave youth, prematurely burdened by the troubles of his country and the lower classes, felt dazzled and uneasy, as if too warm a sun was shining full upon him.

"Where's a book?" cried Algy Scott, who sat by in the luxury of his convalescence. "Let's try; I don't believe any of you fellows could spell this any more than Miss Stella—here you are—sesquipedalian. Now, Miss Tredgold, there is your chance."

Stella put her pretty head on one side, and her hands behind her. This was a sort of thing which she understood better than University Extension. "S-e-s," she began, and then broke off. "Oh, what is the next syllable? Break it down into little, quite little syllables—*quigh*—I know that, q-u-i-p. There, oh, help me, help me, someone!" There was quite a crush round the little shining, charming figure, as she turned from one to another in pretended distress, holding out her pretty hands. And then there were several tries, artificially unsuccessful, and the greatest merriment in the knot which surrounded Stella, thinking it all "great fun." The Earl, with a smile on his face which was not so superior as he thought, but a little tinged by the sense of being "out of it," was edged outside of this laughing circle, and Lady Mary came and placed her arm within his to console him. The brother

and sister lingered for a moment looking on with a disappointed chill, though they were so superior; but it became clear to his lordship from that moment, though with a little envy in the midst of the shock and disapproval, that Stella Tredgold, unable to spell and laughing over it with all those fellows, was not the heroine for him.

Lady Jane, indeed, would have been both angry and disappointed had the case turned out otherwise; for her nephew was not poor and did not stand in need of any *mésalliance*, whereas she had planned the whole affair for Charlie Somers' benefit and no other. And, indeed, the plan worked very well. Sir Charles had no objection at all to the *rôle* assigned him. Stella did not require to be approached with any show of deference or devotion; she was quite willing to be treated as a chum, to respond to a call more curt than reverential. "I say, come on and see the horses." "Look here, Miss Tredgold, let's have a stroll before lunch." "Come along and look at the puppies." These were the kind of invitations addressed to her; and Stella came along tripping, buttoning up her jacket, putting on a cap, the first she could find, upon her fluffy hair. She was *bon camarade*, and did not "go in for sentiment." It was she who was the first to call him Charlie, as she had been on the eve of doing several times in the Lottie Seton days, which now looked like the age before the Flood to this pair.

"Fancy only knowing you through that woman," cried Stella; "and you should have heard how she bullied me after that night of the sail!"

"Jealous," said Sir Charles in his moustache. "Never likes to lose any fellow she knows."

"But she was not losing you!" cried Stella with much innocence. "What harm could it do to her that you spent one evening with—anyone else?"

"Knows better than that, does Lottie," the laconic lover said.

"Oh, stuff!" cried Stella. "It was only to make herself disagreeable. But she never was any friend of mine."

"Not likely. Lottie knows a thing or two. Not so soft as all that. Put you in prison if she could—push you out of her way."

"But I was never in her way," cried Stella.

At which Sir Charles laughed loud and long. "Tell you what it is—as bad as Lottie. Can't have you talk to fellows like Uppin'ton. Great prig, not your sort at all. Call myself your sort, Stella, eh? Since anyhow you're mine."

"I don't know what you mean by your sort," Stella said, but with downcast eyes.

"Yes, you do—chums—always get on. Awf'ly fond of you, don't you know? Eh? Marriage awf'l bore, but can't be helped. Look here! Off to India if you won't have me," the wooer said.

"Oh, Charlie!"

"Fact; can't stand it here any more—except you'd have me, Stella."

"I don't want," said Stella with a little gasp, "to have any one—just now."

"Not surprised," said Sir Charles, "marriage awf'l bore. Glad regiment's ordered off; no good in England now. Knock about in India; get knocked on the head most likely. No fault of yours—if you can't cotton to it, little girl."

"Oh, Charlie! but I don't want you to go to India," Stella said.

"Well, then, keep me here. There are no two ways of it," he said more distinctly than usual, holding out his hand.

And Stella put her hand with a little hesitation into his. She was not quite sure she wanted to do so. But she did not want him to go away. And though marriage was an awf'l bore, the preparations for it were "great fun." And he was her sort—they were quite sure to get on. She liked him better than any of the others, far better than that prig, Uffington, though he was an earl. And it would be nice on the whole to be called my Lady, and not Miss any longer. And Charlie was very nice; she liked him far better than any of

the others. That was the refrain of Stella's thoughts as she turned over in her own room all she had done. To be married at twenty is pleasant too. Some girls nowadays do not marry till thirty or near it, when they are almost decrepit. That was what would happen to Kate; if, indeed, she ever married at all. Stella's mind then jumped to a consideration of the wedding presents and who would give her—what, and then to her own appearance in her wedding dress, walking down the aisle of the old church. What a fuss all the Stanleys would be in about the decorations; and then there were the bridesmaids to be thought of. Decidedly the preliminaries would be great fun. Then, of course, afterwards she would be presented and go into society—real society—not this mere country house business. On the whole there was a great deal that was desirable in it, all round.

"Now have over the little prim one for me," said Algy Scott. "I say, cousin Jane, you owe me that much. It was I that really suffered for that little thing's whim—and to get no good of it; while Charlie—no, I don't want this one, the little prim one for my money. If you are going to have a dance to end off with, have her over for me."

"I may have her over, but not for you, my boy," said Lady Jane. "I have the fear of your mother before my eyes, if you haven't. A little Tredgold girl for my Lady Scott! No, thank you, Algy, I am not going to fly in your mother's face, whatever you may do."

"Somebody will have to fly in her face sooner or later," Algy said composedly; "and, mind you, my mother would like to tread gold as well as any one."

"Don't abandon every principle, Algy. I can forgive anything but a pun."

"It's such a very little one," he said.

And Lady Jane did ask Katherine to the dance, who was very much bewildered by the state of affairs, by her sister's engagement, which everybody knew about, and the revolution which had taken place in everything, without the least intimation being conveyed to those most concerned. Cap-

tain Scott's attentions to herself were the least of her thoughts. She was impatient of the ball—impatient of further delay. Would it all be so easy as Stella thought? Would the old man, as they called him, take it with as much delight as was expected? She pushed Algy away from her mind as if he had been a fly in the great preoccupations of her thoughts.

CHAPTER XII.

"BRAVO, Charlie!" said Lady Jane. "I never knew anything better or quicker done. My congratulations! You have proved yourself a man of sense and business. Now you've got to tackle the old man."

"Nothin' of th' sort," said Sir Charles, with a dull blush covering all that was not hair of his countenance. "Sweet on little girl. Like her awf'ly; none of your business for me."

"So much the better, and I respect you all the more; but now comes the point at which you have really to show yourself a hero and a man of mettle—the old father——"

Sir Charles walked the whole length of the great drawing-room and back again. He pulled at his moustache till it seemed likely that it might come off. He thrust one hand deep into his pocket, putting up the corresponding shoulder. "Ah!" he said with a long-drawn breath, "there's the rub." He was not aware that he was quoting any one, but yet would have felt more or less comforted by the thought that a fellow in his circumstances might have said the same thing before him.

"Yes, there's the rub indeed," said his sympathetic but amused friend and backer-up. "Stella is the apple of his eye."

"Shows sense in that."

"Well, perhaps," said Lady Jane doubtfully. She thought the little prim one might have had a little consideration too, being partially enlightened as to a certain attractiveness in Katherine through the admiration of Algy Scott. "Anyhow, it will make it all the harder. But that's doubtful too. He will probably like his pet child to be Lady Somers,

which sounds very well. Anyhow, you must settle it with him at once. I can't let it be said that I let girls be proposed to in my house, and that afterwards the men don't come up to the scratch."

"Not my way," said Sir Charles. "Never refuse even it were a harder jump than that."

"Oh, you don't know how hard a jump it is till you try," said Lady Jane. But she did not really expect that it would be hard. That old Tredgold should not be pleased with such a marriage for his daughter did not occur to either of them. Of course Charlie Somers was poor; if he had been rich it was not at all likely that he would have wanted to marry Stella; but Lady Somers was a pretty title, and no doubt the old man would desire to have his favourite child so distinguished. Lady Jane was an extremely sensible woman, and as likely to estimate the people round her at their just value as anybody I know; but she could not get it out of her head that to be hoisted into society was a real advantage, however it was accomplished, whether by marriage or in some other way. Was she right? was she wrong? Society is made up of very silly people, but also there the best are to be met, and there is something in the Freemasonry within these imaginary boundaries which is attractive to the wistful imagination without. But was Mr. Tredgold aware of these advantages, or did he know even what it was, or that his daughters were not in it? This was what Lady Jane did not know. Somers, it need not be said, did not think on the subject. What he thought of was that old Tredgold's money would enable him to marry, to fit out his old house as it ought to be, and restore it to its importance in his county, and, in the first place of all, would prevent the necessity of going to India with his regiment. This, indeed, was the first thing in his mind, after the pleasure of securing Stella, which, especially since all the men in the house had so flattered and ran after her, had been very gratifying to him. He loved her as well as he understood love or she either. They were on very equal terms.

Katherine did not give him any very warm reception when the exciting news was communicated to her; but then Katherine was the little prim one, and not effusive to any one. "She is always like that," Stella had said—"a stick! but she'll stand up for me, whatever happens, all the same."

"I say," cried Sir Charles alarmed—"think it'll be a hard job, eh? with the old man, don't you know?"

"You will please," said Stella with determination, "speak more respectfully of papa. I don't know if it'll be a hard job or not—but you're big enough for that, or anything, I hope."

"Oh, I'm big enough," he said; but there was a certain faltering in his tone.

He did not drive with the two girls on their return to the Cliff the morning after the ball, but walked in to Siplin the five miles to pull himself together. He had no reason that he knew of to feel anxious. The girl—it was by this irreverent title that he thought of her, though he was so fond of her—liked him, and her father, it was reported, saw everything with Stella's eyes. She was the one that he favoured in everything. No doubt it was she who would have the bulk of his fortune. Sir Charles magnanimously resolved that he would not see the other wronged—that she should always have her share, whatever happened. He remembered long afterwards the aspect of the somewhat muddy road, and the hawthorn hedges with the russet leaves hanging to them still, and here and there a bramble with the intense red of a leaf lighting up the less brilliant colour. Yes, she should always have her share! He had a half-conscious feeling that to form so admirable a resolution would do him good in the crisis that was about to come.

Mr. Tredgold stood at the door to meet his daughters when they came home, very glad to see them, and to know that everybody was acquainted with the length of Stella's stay at Steephill, and the favour shown her by Lady Jane, and delighted to have them back also, and to feel that these two pretty creatures—and especially the prettiest of the two—were his own private property, though there were no girls like them, far or near. "Well," he said, "so here you are back again—

glad to be back again I'll be bound, though you've been among all the grandees! Nothing like home, is there, Stella, after all?" (He said 'ome, alas! and Stella felt it as she had never done before.) "Well, you are very welcome to your old pa. Made a great sensation, did you, little 'un, diamonds and all? How did the diamonds go down, eh, Stella? You must give them to me to put in my safe, for they're not safe, valuable things like that, with you."

"Dear papa, do you think all that of the diamonds?" said Stella. "They are only little things—nothing to speak of. You should have seen the diamonds at Steephill. If you think they are worth putting in the safe, pray do so; but I should not think of giving you the trouble. Well, we didn't come back to think of the safe and my little *rivière*, did we, Kate? As for that, the pendant you have given her is handsomer of its kind, papa."

"Couldn't leave Katie out, could I? when I was giving you such a thing as that?" said Mr. Tredgowl a little confused.

"Oh, I hope you don't think I'm jealous," cried Stella. "Kate doesn't have things half nice enough. She ought to have them nicer than mine, for she is the eldest. We amused ourselves very well, thank you, papa. Kate couldn't move without Algy Scott after her wherever she turned. You'll have him coming over here to make love to you, papa."

"I think you might say a word of something a great deal more important, Stella."

"Oh, let me alone with your seriousness. Papa will hear of that fast enough, when you know Charlie is—— I'm going upstairs to take off my things. I'll bring the diamonds if I can remember," she added, pausing for a moment at the door and waving her hand to her father, who followed her with delighted eyes.

"What a saucy little thing she is!" he said. "You and I have a deal to put up with from that little hussy, Katie, haven't we? But there aren't many like her all the same, are there? We shouldn't like it if we were to lose her. She keeps everything going with her impudent little ways."

"You are in great danger of losing her, papa. There is a man on the road——"

"What's that—what's that, Katie? A man that is after my Stella? A man to rob me of my little girl? Well, I like 'em to come after her, I like to see her with a lot at her feet. And who's this one? The man with a handle to his name?"

"Yes; I suppose you would call it a handle. It was one of the men that were out in the boat with her—Sir Charles——"

"Oh!" said Mr. Tredgold, with his countenance falling. "And why didn't the t'other one—his lordship—come forward? I don't care for none of your Sir Charleses—reminds me of a puppy, that name."

"The puppies are King Charles's, papa. I don't know why the Earl did not come forward; because he didn't want to, I suppose. And, indeed, he was not Stella's sort at all."

"Stella's sort! Stella's sort!" cried the old man. "What right has Stella to have a sort when she might have got a crown to put on her pretty head. Coronet? Yes, I know; it's all the same. And where is this fellow? Do you mean that you brought him in my carriage, hiding him somewhere between your petticoats? I will soon settle your Sir Charles, unless he can settle shilling to shilling down."

"Sir Charles is walking," said Katherine; "and, papa, please to remember that Stella is fond of him, she is really fond of him; she is—in love with him. At least I think so, otherwise—— You would not do anything to make Stella unhappy, papa?"

"You leave that to me," said the old man; but he chuckled more than ever.

Katherine did not quite understand her father, but she concluded that he was not angry—that he could not be going to receive the suitor unfavourably, that there was nothing to indicate a serious shock of any kind. She followed Stella upstairs, and went into her room to comfort her with this assurance; for which I cannot say that Stella was at all grateful.

"Not angry? Why should he be angry?" the girl cried. "Serious? I never expected him to be serious. What could

he find to object to in Charlie? I am not anxious about it at all."

Katherine withdrew into her own premises, feeling herself much humbled and set down. But somehow she could not make herself happy about that chuckle of Mr. Tredgold's. It was not a pleasant sound to hear.

Sir Charles Somers felt it very absurd that he should own a tremor in his big bosom as he walked up the drive, all fringed with its rare plants in every shade of autumn colour. It was not a long drive, and the house by no means a "place," but only a seaside villa, though (as Mr. Tredgold hoped) the costliest house in the neighbourhood. The carriage had left fresh marks upon the gravel, which were in a kind of a way the foot-steps of his beloved, had the wooer been sentimental enough to think of that. What he did think of was whether the old fellow would see him at once and settle everything before lunch, comfortably, or whether he would walk into a family party with the girls hanging about, not thinking it worth while to take off their hats before that meal was over. There might be advantage in this. It would put a little strength into himself, who was unquestionably feeling shaky, ridiculous as that was, and would be the better, after his walk, of something to eat; and it might also put old Tredgold in a better humour to have his luncheon before this important interview. But, on the other hand, there was the worry of the suspense. Somers did not know whether he was glad or sorry when he was told that Mr. Tredgold was in his library, and led through the long passages to that warm room which was at the back of the house. A chair was placed for him just in front of the fire as he had foreseen, and the day, though damp, was warm, and he had heated himself with his long walk.

"Sit down, sit down, Sir Charles," said the old gentleman, whose writing-table was placed at one side, where he had the benefit of the warmth without the glare of the fire. And he leant amicably and cheerfully across the corner of the table, and said, "What can I do for you this morning?" rubbing his hands. He looked so like a genial money-lender before

the demands of the borrower are exposed to him, that Sir Charles, much more accustomed to that sort of thing than to a prospective father-in-law, found it very difficult not to propose, instead of for Stella, that Mr. Tredgold should do him a little bill. He got through his statement of the case in a most confused and complicated way. It was indeed possible, if it had not been for the hint received beforehand, that the old man would not have picked up his meaning; as it was, he listened patiently with a calm face of amusement, which was the most aggravating thing in the world.

"Am I to understand," he said at last, "that you are making me a proposal for Stella, Sir Charles? Eh? It is for Stella, is it, and not for any other thing? Come, that's a good thing to understand each other. Stella is a great pet of mine. She is a very great pet. There is nobody in the world that I think like her, or that I would do so much for."

"M' own feelings—to a nicety—but better expressed," Sir Charles said.

"That girl has had a deal of money spent on her, Sir Charles, first and last; you wouldn't believe the money that girl has cost me, and I don't say she ain't worth it. But she's a very expensive article and has been all her life. It's right you should look that in the face before we get any forwarder. She has always had everything she has fancied, and she'll cost her husband a deal of money, when she gets one, as she has done me."

This address made Somers feel very small, for what could he reply? To have been quite truthful, the only thing he could have said would have been, "I hope, sir, you will give her so much money that it will not matter how expensive she is;" but this he could not say. "I know very well," he stammered, "a lady—wants a lot of things;—hope Stella—will never—suffer, don't you know?—through giving her to me."

Ah, how easy it was to say that! But not at all the sort of thing to secure Stella's comfort, or her husband's either, which, on the whole, was the most important of the two to Sir Charles.

"That's just what we've got to make sure of," said old

Tredgold, chuckling more than ever. There was no such joke to the old man as this which he was now enjoying. And he did not look forbidding or malevolent at all. Though what he said was rather alarming, his face seemed to mean nothing but amiability and content. "Now, look here, Sir Charles, I don't know what your circumstances are, and they would be no business of mine, but for this that you've been telling me; you young fellows are not very often flush o' money, but you may have got it tied up, and that sort of thing. I don't give my daughter to any man as can't count down upon the table shillin' for shillin' with me." This he said very deliberately, with an emphasis on every word; then he made a pause, and, putting his hand in his pocket, produced a large handful of coins, which he proceeded to tell out in lines upon the table before him. Sir Charles watched him in consternation for a moment, and then with a sort of fascination followed his example. By some happy chance he had a quantity of change in his pocket. He began with perfect gravity to count it out on his side, coin after coin, in distinct rows. The room was quite silent, the air only moved by the sound of a cinder falling now and then on the hearth and the clink of the money as the two actors in this strange little drama went on with the greatest seriousness counting out coin after coin.

When they had both finished they looked up and met each other's eyes. Then Mr. Tredgold threw himself back in his chair, kicking up his cloth-shod feet. "See," he cried, with a gurgle of laughter in his throat. "that's the style for me."

He was pleased to have his fine jest appreciated, and doubly amused by the intense and puzzled gravity of his companion's face.

"Don't seem to have as many as you," Sir Charles said. "Five short, by Jove."

"Shillin's don't matter," said the old man; "but suppose every shillin' was five thousand pounds, and where would you be then? eh? perhaps you would go on longer than I could. What do I know of your private affairs? But that's what the man that gets Stella will have to do—table down his money,

cent for cent, five thousand for five thousand, as I do. I know what my little girl costs a year. I won't have her want for anything, if it's ever so unreasonable; so, my fine young man, though you've got a handle to your name, unless you can show the colour of your money, my daughter is not for you."

Sir Charles Somers's eyes had acquired a heavy stare of astonishment and consternation. What he said in his disappointment and horror he did not himself know—only one part of it fully reached the outer air, and that was the unfortunate words, "money of her own."

"Money of her own!" cried old Tredgold. "Oh, yes, she's got money of her own—plenty of money of her own—but not to keep a husband upon. No, nor to keep herself either. Her husband's got to keep her, when she gets one. If I count out to the last penny of my fortune he's got to count with me. I'll give her the equal. I'll not stint a penny upon her; but give my money or her money, it's all the same thing, to keep up another family, her husband and her children, and the whole race of them—no, Sir Charles Somers," cried Mr. Tredgold, hastily shuffling his silver into his pocket, "that's not good enough for me."

Saying which he jumped up in his cloth shoes and began to walk about the room, humming to himself loudly something which he supposed to be a tune. Sir Charles, for his part, sat for a long time gazing at his money on the table. He did not take it up as Tredgold had done. He only stared at it vacantly, going over it without knowing, line by line. Then he, too, rose slowly.

"Can't count with you," he said. "Know I can't. Chance this—put down what I put down—no more. Got to go to India in that case. Never mind, Stella and I——"

"Don't you speak any more of Stella. I won't have it. Go to India, indeed—my little girl! I will see you—further first. I will see you at the bottom of the sea first! No. If you can count with me, something like, you can send your lawyer to me. If you can't, do you think I'm a man to put pounds again' your shillin's? Not I! And I advise you just

to give it up, Sir Charles Somers, and speak no more about Stella to me.'"

It was with the most intense astonishment that Charlie Somers found himself out of doors, going humbly back along that drive by which he had approached so short a time before, as he thought, his bride, his happiness, and his luncheon. He went dismally away without any of them, stupefied, not half conscious what had happened; his tail more completely between his legs, to use his own simile, than whipped dog ever had. He had left all his shillings on the table laid out in two shining rows. But he did not think of his shillings. He could not think. His consternation made him speechless both in body and in soul.

It was not till late in the afternoon, when he had regained his self-command a little, that he began to ask himself the question, What would Stella do? Ah, what would Stella do? That was another side of the question altogether.

CHAPTER XIII.

THERE was great consternation at Steeplehill when Somers came back, not indeed so cowed as when he left the Cliff, but still with the aspect more or less of a man who had been beaten and who was extremely surprised to find himself so. He came back, to make it more remarkable, while the diminished party were still at luncheon, and sat down humbly in the lowest place by the side of the governess to partake of the mutton and rice pudding which Lady Jane thought most appropriate when the family was alone. Algy was the only stranger left of all the large party which had dispersed that morning, the few remaining men having gone out to shoot; and to Algy, as an invalid, the roast mutton was of course quite appropriate.

"What luck! without even your lunch!" they cried out—Algy with a roar (the fellow was getting as strong as an elephant) of ridicule and delight.

"As you see," said Sir Charles with a solemnity which he could not shake off. The very governess divined his meaning, and that sharp little Janey—the horrid little thing, a mite of fourteen. "Oh, didn't Stella ask you to stay to lunch? Didn't they give you anything to eat after your walk?" that precocious critic cried. And Sir Charles felt with a sensation of hatred, wishing to kill them all, that his own aspect was enough to justify all their jokes. He was as serious as a mustard-pot; he could not conjure up a laugh on his face; he could not look careless and indifferent or say a light word. His tail was between his legs; he felt it, and he felt sure that everybody must see it, down to the little boys, who, with spoonfuls of rice suspended, stared at him with round blue eyes; and he dared not say, "Confound the little beggars!" before Lady Jane

"What is the matter?" she asked him, hurrying him after luncheon to her own room away from the mocking looks of the governess—she too mixing herself up with it!—and the gibes of Algy. "For goodness' sake," she cried, "don't look as if you had been having a whipping, Charlie Somers! What has been done to you? Have you quarrelled with Stella on the way?"

Sir Charles walked to the window, pulling his moustache, and stood there looking out, turning his back on Lady Jane. A window is a great resource to a man in trouble. "Old man turned me off," he said.

"What? *What?* The old man turned you off? Oh!" cried Lady Jane in a tone of relief; "so long as it was only the old man!"

Sir Charles stood by the window for some time longer, and then he turned back to the fire, near which Lady Jane had comfortably seated herself. She was much concerned about him, yet not so much concerned as to interfere with her own arrangements—her chair just at the right angle, her screen to preserve her from the glare. She kept opening and looking at the notes that lay on her table while she talked to him.

"Oh, old Tredgold," she said. "He was bound to object at first. About money, I suppose? That of course is the only thing he knows anything about. Did he ask you what you would settle upon her? You should have said boldly, 'Somer-tou,' and left him to find out the rest. But I don't suppose you had the sense to stop his mouth like that. You would go and enter into explanations."

"Never got so far," said Sir Charles. "He that stopped my mouth. Came to lay down pound for pound with him, or else no go."

"Pound for pound with him!" cried Lady Jane in consternation. She was so much startled that she pushed back her chair from her writing-table, and so came within the range of the fire and disorganized all her arrangements. "Now I think of it," she said. "(pull that screen this way, Charlie) I have heard him say something like that. Pound for pound

with him ! Why, the old——" (she made a pause without putting in the word as so many people do), "is a millionaire !"

Sir Charles, who was standing before the fire with his back to it, in the habitual attitude of Englishmen, pulled his moustache again and solemnly nodded his head.

"And who does he think," cried Lady Jane, carried away by her feelings, "that could do *that* would ever go near him and his vulgar, common—— Oh, I beg your pardon, Charlie, I am sure !" she said.

"No pardon needed. Know what you mean," Somers said with a wave of his hand.

"Of course," said Lady Jane with emphasis, "I don't mean the girls, or else you may be sure I never should have taken them out or had them here." She made a little pause after this disclaimer, in the heat of which there was perhaps just a little doubt of her own motives, checked by the reflection that Katherine Tredgold at least was not vulgar, and might have been anybody's daughter. She went on again after a moment. "But he is an old—— Oh ! I would not pay the least attention to what he said ; he was bound to say that sort of thing at first. Do you imagine for a moment that any man who could do *that* would please Stella ? What kind of man could do that ? Only perhaps an old horror like himself, whom a nice girl would never look at. Oh ! I think I should be easy in my mind, Charlie, if I were you. It is impossible, you know ! There's no such man, no such *young* man. Can you fancy Stella accepting an old fellow made of money ? I don't believe in it for a moment," said Lady Jane.

"Old fellows got sons——sometimes," said Sir Charles, "City men, rolling in money, don't you know ?"

"One knows all those sort of people," said Lady Jane ; "you could count them on your fingers ; and they go in for rank, &c., not for other millionaires. No, Charlie, I don't see any call you have to be so discouraged. Why did you come in looking such a whipped dog ? It will be all over the island in no time and through the regiment that you have been refused

by Stella Tredgold. The father's nothing. The father was quite sure to refuse. Rather picturesque that about laying down pound for pound, isn't it? It makes one think of a great table groaning under heaps of gold."

"Jove!" said Sir Charles. "Old beggar said shillin' for shillin'. Had a heap of silver—got it like a fool—didn't see what he was driving at—paid it out on the table." He pulled his moustache to the very roots and uttered a short and cavernous laugh. "Left it there, by Jove—all my change," he cried; "not a blessed thruppenny to throw to little girl at gate."

"Left it there?" said Lady Jane—"on the table?" Her gravity was overpowered by this detail. "Upon my word, Charlie Somers, for all your big moustache and your six feet and your experiences, I declare I don't think there ever was such a simpleton born."

Somers bore her laughter very steadily. He was not unused to it. The things in which he showed himself a simpleton were in relation to the things in which he was prematurely wise as three to a hundred; but yet there were such things. And he was free to acknowledge that leaving his seventeen shillings spread out on the millionaire's table, or even taking the millionaire's challenge *au pied de la lettre*, was the act of a simpleton. He stood tranquilly with his back to the fire till Lady Jane had got her laugh out. Then she resumed with a sort of apology:

"It was too much for me, Charlie. I could not help laughing. What will become of all that money, I wonder? Will he keep it and put it to interest? I should like to have seen him after you were gone. I should like to have seen him afterwards, when Stella had her knife at his throat, asking him what he meant by it. You may trust to Stella, my dear boy. She will soon bring her father to reason. He may be all sorts of queer things to you, but he can't stand against her. She can twist him round her little finger. If it had been Katherine I should not have been so confident. But Stella—he never has refused anything to Stella since ever she was born."

"Think so, really?" said Somers through his moustache. He was beginning to revive a little again, but yet the impression of old Tredgold's chuckling laugh and his contemptuous certainty was not to be got over lightly. The gloom of the rejected was still over him.

"Yes, I think so," said Lady Jane. "Don't, for Heaven's sake, go on in that hang-dog way. There's nothing happened but what was to be expected. Of course, the old curmudgeon would make an attempt to guard his money-bags. I wish I were as sure of a company for Jack as I am of Stella's power to do anything she likes with her father. But if you go down in this way at the first touch——"

"No intention of going down," said Sir Charles, piqued. "Marry her to-morrow—take her out to India—then see what old beggar says."

"That, indeed," cried Lady Jane—"that would be a fine revenge on him! Don't propose it to Stella if you don't want her to accept, for she would think it the finest fun in the world."

"By George!" Somers said, and a smile began to lift up the corners of his moustache.

"That would bring him to his senses, indeed," Lady Jane said reflectively; "but it would be rather cruel, Charlie. After all, he is an old man. Not a very venerable old man, perhaps; not what you would call a lovely old age, is it? but still—— Oh, I think it would be cruel. You need not go so far as that. But we shall soon hear what Stella says."

And it very soon was known what Stella said. Stella wrote in a whirlwind of passion, finding nothing too bad to say of papa. An old bull, an old pig, were the sweetest of the similes she used. She believed that he wanted to kill her, to drag her by the hair of her head, to shut her up in a dungeon or a back kitchen or something. She thought he must have been changed in his sleep, for he was not in the very least like her own old nice papa, and Kate thought so too. Kate could not understand it any more than she could. But one thing was certain—that, let papa say what he would or do what he

would, she (Stella) never would give in. She would be true, whatever happened. And if she were locked up anywhere she would trust in her Charlie to get her out. All her trust was in her Charlie, she declared. She had got his money, his poor dear bright shillings, of which papa had robbed him, and put them in a silk bag, which she always meant to preserve and carry about with her. She called it Charlie's fortune. Poor dear, dear Charlie; he had left it all for her. She knew it was for her, and she would never part with it, never! This whirlwind of a letter amused Charlie very much; he did not mind letting his friends read it. They all laughed over it, and declared that she was a little brick, and that he must certainly stick to her whatever happened. The old fellow was sure to come round, they all said; no old father could ever stand out against a girl like that. She had him on toast, everybody knew.

These were the encouraging suggestions addressed to Sir Charles by his most intimate friends, who encouraged him still more by their narratives of how Lottie Seton tossed her head and declared that Charlie Somers had been waiting all along for some rich girl to drop into his mouth. He had always had an *arrière pensée*, she cried (whatever that might be), and had never been at all amusin' at the best of times. He was very amusin' now, however, with Stella's letter in his pocket and this absorbing question to discuss. The whole regiment addressed itself with all the brain it possessed to the consideration of the subject, which, of course, was so much the more urgent in consequence of the orders under which it lay. To go or not to go to India, that was the rub, as Charlie had said. Stella only complicated the question, which had been under discussion before. He did not want to go; but then, on the other hand, if he remained at home, his creditors would be rampant and he would be within their reach, which would not be the case if he went to India. And India meant double pay. And if it could be secured that Stella's father should send an expedition after them to bring them back within a year, then going to India with Stella as a companion

would be the best fun in the world. To go for a year was one thing, to go as long as the regiment remained, doing ordinary duty, was quite another. Everybody whom he consulted, even Lady Jane, though she began to be a little frightened by the responsibility, assured him that old Tredgold would never hold out for a year. Impossible! an old man in shaky health who adored his daughter. "Doubt if he'll give you time to get on board before he's after you," Algy said. "You'll find telegrams at Suez or at Aden or somewhere," said another; and a third chaunted (being at once poetical and musical, which was not common in the regiment) a verse which many of them thought had been composed for the occasion:

"Come back, come back," he cried in grief
Across the stormy water,
"And I'll forgive your Highland chief,
My daughter, O my daughter!"

"Though Charlie ain't a Highland chief, you know," said one of the youngsters. "If it had been Algy, now!"

All these things worked very deeply in the brain of Sir Charles Somers, Baronet. He spent a great deal of time thinking of them. A year in India would be great fun. Stella, for her part, was wild with delight at the thought of it. If it could but be made quite clear that old Tredgold, dying for the loss of his favourite child, would be sure to send for her! Everybody said there was not a doubt on the subject. Stella, who ought to know, was sure of it; so was Lady Jane, though she had got frightened and cried, "Oh, don't ask me!" when importuned the hundredth time for her opinion. If a fellow could only be quite sure! Sometimes a chilling vision of the "old beggar" came across Charlie's mind, and the courage began to ooze out at his fingers' ends. That old fellow did not look like an old fellow who would give in. He looked a dangerous old man, an old man capable of anything. Charles Somers was by no means a coward, but when he remembered the look which Mr. Tredgold had cast upon him, all the strength went out of him. To marry an expensive wife

who had never been stiated in her expenses and take her out to India, and then find that there was no relenting, remorseful father behind them, but only the common stress and strain of a poor man's life in a profession, obliged to live upon his pay! What should he do if this happened? But everybody around him assured him that it could not, would not happen. Stella had the old gentleman "on toast." He could not live without her; he would send to the end of the world to bring her back; he would forgive anything, Highland chief or whoever it might be. Even Lady Jane said so. "Don't ask me to advise you," that lady cried. "I daren't take the responsibility. How can I tell whether Stella and you are fond enough of each other to run such a risk? Old Mr. Tredgold? Oh, as for old Mr. Tredgold, I should not really fear any lasting opposition from him. He may bluster a little, he may try to be overbearing, he may think he can frighten his daughter. But, of course, he will give in. Oh, yes, he will give in. Stella is everything to him. She is the very apple of his eye. It is very unjust to Katherine I always have said, and always will say. But that is how it is. Stella's little finger is more to him than all the rest of the world put together. But please, please don't ask advice from me!"

Sir Charles walked up and down the room, the room at Steephill, the room at the barracks, wherever he happened to be, and pulled his moustache almost till the blood came. But neither that intimate councillor, nor his fellow-officers, nor his anxious friends gave him any definite enlightenment. He was in love, too, in his way, which pushed him on, but he was by no means without prudence, which held him back. If old Tredgold did not break his heart, if he took the other one into Stella's place—for to be sure Katherine was his daughter also, though not equal to Stella! If!—it is a little word, but there is terrible meaning in it. In that case what would happen? He shuddered and turned away from the appalling thought.

CHAPTER XIV.

"KATE, Kate, Kate!" cried Stella. All had been quiet between the two rooms connected by that open door. Katherine was fastening the ribbon at her neck before the glass. This made her less ready to respond to Stella's eager summons; but the tone of the third repetition of her name was so urgent that she dropped the ends of the ribbon and flew to her sister. Stella was leaning half out of the open window. "Kate," she cried—"Kate, he has sent him away!"

"Who is sent away?" cried Katherine, in amazement.

Stella's answer was to seize her sister by the arm and pull her half out of the window, endangering her equilibrium. Thus enforced, however, Katherine saw the figure of Sir Charles Somers disappearing round the corner of a group of trees, which so entirely recalled the image, coarse yet expressive, of a dog with its tail between its legs, that no certainty of disappointment and failure could be more complete. The two girls stared after him until he had disappeared, and then Stella drew her sister in again, and they looked into each other's eyes for a moment. Even Stella the unsubduable was cowed; her face was pale, her eyes round and staring with astonishment and trouble; the strength was all taken out of her by bewilderment. What did it mean? Papa, papa, he who had denied her nothing, who had been the more pleased the more costly was the toy which she demanded! Had Charlie offended him? Had he gone the wrong way to work? What could he possibly have done to receive a rebuff from papa?

"Of course I shall not stand it," Stella cried, when she had recovered herself a little. "He shall not have much

peace of his life if he crosses me: You let him dance upon you, Kate, and never said a word—though I don't suppose you cared, or surely you would have stood out a little more than you did. But he shan't dance upon me—he shall soon find out the difference. I am going to him at once to ask what he means." She rushed towards the door, glowing anew with courage and spirit, but then suddenly stopped herself, and came running back, throwing herself suddenly on Katherine's shoulders.

"Oh, Kate, why should parents be so hard," she said, shedding a few tears—"and so hypocritical!" she exclaimed, rousing herself again—"pretending to be ready to do everything, and then doing nothing!"

"Oh, hush, Stella!" cried Katherine, restraining her; "there is nothing you have wanted till now that papa has not done."

"What!" cried the girl indignantly. "Diamonds and such wretched things." She made a gesture as if to pull something from her throat and throw it on the floor, though the diamonds, naturally, at this hour in the morning, were not there. "But the first thing I really want—the only thing—oh, let me go, Kate, let me go and ask him what he means!"

"Wait a little," said Katherine—"wait a little; it may not be as bad as we think; it may not be bad at all. Let us go down as if nothing had happened. Perhaps Sir Charles has only—gone—to fetch something."

"Like that?" cried Stella; and then a something of the ridiculous in the drooping figure came across her volatile mind. He was so like, so very like, that dog with his tail between his legs. She burst out into a laugh. "Poor Charlie, oh, poor Charlie! he looked exactly like—but I will pay papa for this," the girl cried.

"Oh, not now," said Katherine. "Remember, he is an old man—we must try not to cross him but to soothe him. He may have been vexed to think of losing you, Stella. He may have been—a little sharp; perhaps to try to—break it off—for a time."

"And you think he might succeed, I shouldn't wonder," Stella cried, tossing her head high. To tell the truth, Katherine was by no means sure that he might not succeed. She had not a great confidence in the depth of the sentiment which connected her sister and Sir Charles. She believed that on one side or the other that tie might be broken, and that it would be no great harm. But she made no reply to Stella's question. She only begged her to have patience a little, to make no immediate assault upon her father. "You know the doctor said he must be very regular — and not be disturbed — in his meals and things."

"Oh, if it is lunch you are thinking of!" cried Stella, with great disdain; but after a little she consented to take things quietly and await the elucidation of events. The meal that followed was not, however, a very comfortable meal. Mr. Tredgold came in with every evidence of high spirits, but was also nervous, not knowing what kind of reception he was likely to meet with. He was as evidently relieved when they seated themselves at table without any questions, but it was a relief not unmingled with excitement. He talked continuously and against time, but he neither asked about their visit as he usually did, nor about the previous night's entertainment, nor Stella's appearance nor her triumphs. Stella sat very silent at her side of the table. And Katherine thought that her father was a little afraid. He made haste to escape as soon as the luncheon was over, and it was not a moment too soon, for Stella's excitement was no longer restrainable. "What has he said to Charlie—what has he done to him?" she cried. "Do you think he would dare send him away for good and never say a word to me? What is the meaning of it, Kate? You would not let me speak, though it choked me to sit and say nothing. Where is my Charlie? and oh, how dared he, how dared he, to send him away?"

Katherine suggested that he might still be lingering about waiting for the chance of seeing one of them, and Stella darted out accordingly and flew through the grounds, in and out of the trees, with her uncovered head shining in the sun, but came

back with no further enlightenment. She then proceeded imperiously to her father's room; where, however, she was again stopped by the butler, who announced that master was having his nap and was not to be disturbed. All this delayed the explanation and prolonged the suspense, which was aggravated, as in so many cases, by the arrival of visitors. "So you have got back, Stella, from your grand visit? Oh, do tell us all about it!" It was perhaps the first fiery ordeal of social difficulty to which that undisciplined little girl had been exposed. And it was so much the more severe that various other sentiments came in—pride in the visit, which was so much greater a privilege than was accorded to the ordinary inhabitants of Sliplin; pride, too, in a show of indifference to it, desire to make her own glories known, and an equally strong desire to represent these glories as nothing more than were habitual and invariable. In the conflict of feeling Stella was drawn a little out of herself and out of the consideration of her father's unimaginable behaviour. Oh, if they only knew the real climax of all those eager questions! If only a hint could have been given of the crowning glory, of the new possession she had acquired, and the rank to which she was about to be elevated!

Stella did not think of "a trumpery baronet" now. It was the Earl whom she thought trumpery, a creation of this reign, as Miss Mildmay said, whereas the Somers went back to the Anglo-Saxons. Stella did not know very well who the Anglo-Saxons were. She did not know that baronetcies are comparatively modern inventions. She only knew that to be Lady Somers was a fine thing, and that she was going to attain that dignity. But then, papa—who was papa, to interfere with her happiness? what could he do to stop a thing she had made up her mind to?—stood in the way. It was papa's fault that she could not make that thrilling, that tremendous announcement to her friends. Her little tongue trembled on the edge of it. At one moment it had almost burst forth. Oh, how silly to be talking of Steephill, of the dance, of the rides, of going to the covert side with the sportsmen's luncheon—all these things which unengaged persons, mere spectators of

life, make so much of—when she had had it in her power to tell something so much more exciting, something that would fly not only through Sliplin and all along the coast but over the whole island before night! And to think she could not tell it—must not say anything about it because of papa!

Thus Stella fretted through the afternoon, determined, however, to “have it out with papa” the moment her visitors were gone, and not, on the whole, much afraid. He had never crossed her in her life before. Since the time when Stella crying for it in the nursery was enough to secure any delight she wanted, till now, when she stood on the edge of life and all its excitements, nothing that she cared for had ever been refused her. She had her little ways of getting whatever she wanted. It was not that he was always willing or always agreed in her wishes; if that had been so, the prospect before her would have been more doubtful; but there were things which he did not like and had yet been made to consent to because of Stella’s wish. Why should he resist her now for the first time? There was no reason in it, no probability in it, no sense. He had been able to say No to Charlie—that was quite another thing. Charlie was very nice, but he was not Stella, though he might be Stella’s chosen; and papa had, no doubt, a little spite against him because of that adventure in the yacht, and because he was poor, and other things. But Stella herself, was it possible that papa could ever hold head against her, look her in the face and deny her anything? No, certainly no! She was going over this in her mind while the visitors were talking, and even when she was giving them an account of what she wore. Her new white, and her diamonds—what diamonds! Oh, hadn’t they heard? A *rivière* that papa had given her; not a big one, you know, like an old lady’s—a little one, but such stones, exactly like drops of dew! As she related this, her hopes—nay, certainties—sprang high. She had not needed to hold up her little finger to have those jewels—a word had done it, the merest accidental word. She had not even had the trouble of wishing for them. And to imagine that he would be likely to cross her now!

"Stella! Stella! where are you going?" Katherine cried.

"I am going—to have it out with papa." The last visitor had just gone; Stella caught the cloth on the tea-table in the sweep of her dress, and disordered everything as she flew by. But Katherine, though so tidy, did not stop to restore things to their usual trimness. She followed her sister along the passage a little more slowly, but with much excitement too. Would Stella conquer, as she usually did? or, for the first time in her life, would she find a blank wall before her which nothing could break down? Katherine could not but remember the curt intimation which had been given to her that James Stanford had been sent away and was never to be spoken of more. But then she was not Stella—she was very different from Stella; she had always felt even (or fancied) that the fact that James Stanford's suit had been to herself and not to Stella had something to do with his rejection. That anyone should have thought of Katherine while Stella was by! She blamed herself for this idea as she followed Stella flying through the long and intricate passages to have it out with papa. Perhaps she had been wrong, Katherine said to herself. If papa held out against Stella this time, she would feel sure she had been wrong.

Stella burst into the room without giving any indication of her approach, and Katherine went in behind her—swept in the wind of her going. But what they saw was a vacant room, the fire purring to itself like a cat, with sleepy little starts and droppings, a level sunbeam coming in broad at one window, and on the table two lines of silver money stretched along the dark table-cloth and catching the eye. They were irregular lines—one all of shillings straight and unbroken, the other shorter, and made up with a half-crown and a sixpence. What was the meaning of this? They consulted each other with their eyes.

"I am coming directly," said Mr. Tredgold from an inner room. The door was open. It was the room in which his safe was, and they could hear him rustling his paper, putting in or taking out something. "Oh, papa, make haste! I am

waiting for you," Stella cried in her impatience. She could scarcely brook at the last moment this unnecessary delay.

He came out, but not for a minute more; and then he was wiping his lips as if he had been taking something to support himself; which indeed was the case, and he had need of it. He came in with a great show of cheerfulness, rubbing his hands. "What, both of you?" he said, "I thought it was only Stella. I am glad both of you are here. Then you can tell me——"

"Papa, I will tell you nothing, nor shall Kate, till you have answered my question. What have you done to Charlie Somers? Where is he? where have you sent him? and how—how—how da—how could you have sent him away?"

"That's his money," said the old gentleman, pointing to the table. "You'd better pick it up and send it to him; he might miss it afterwards. The fool thought he could lay down money with me; there's only seventeen shillings of it," said Mr. Tredgold contemptuously—"not change for a sovereign! But he might want it. I don't think he had much more in his pocket, and I don't want his small change; no, nor nobody else's. You can pick it up and send it back."

"What does all this mean?" asked Stella in imperious tones, though her heart quaked she could scarcely tell why. "Why have you Charlie Somers's money on your table? and why—why, have you sent him away?"

Mr. Tredgold seated himself deliberately in his chair, first removing the newspaper that lay in it, folding that and placing it carefully on a stand by his side. "Well, my little girl," he said, also taking off his spectacles and folding them before he laid them down, "that's a very easy one to answer. I sent him away because he didn't suit me, my dear."

"But he suited me," cried Stella, "which is surely far more important."

"Well, my pet, you may think so, but I don't. I gave him my reasons. I say nothing against him—a man as I know nothing of, and don't want to know. It's all the same who you send to me; they'll just hear the same thing. The

man I give my little girl to will have to count out shillin' for shillin' with me. That fellow took me at my word, don't you see?—took out a handful of money and began to count it out as grave as a judge. But he couldn't do it, even at that. Seventeen shillings! not as much as change for a sovereign," said Mr. Tredgold with a chuckle. "I told him as he was an ass for his pains. Thousand pound for thousand pound down, that's my rule; and all the baronets in the kingdom—or if they were dukes for that matter—won't get me out of that."

"Papa, do you know what you are saying?" Stella was so utterly bewildered that she did not at all know what she was saying in the sudden arrest of all her thoughts.

"I think so, pet; very well indeed, I should say. I'm a man that has always been particular about business arrangements. Business is one thing; feelings, or so forth, is another. I never let feelings come in when it's a question of business. Money down on the table—shillin's, or thousands, which is plainer, for thousands, and that's all about it; the man who can't do that don't suit me."

Stella stood with two red patches on her cheeks, with her mouth open, with her eyes staring before the easy and complacent old gentleman in his chair. He was, no doubt, conscious of the passion and horror with which she was regarding him, for he shifted the paper and the spectacles a little nervously to give himself a countenance; but he took no notice otherwise, and maintained his easy position—one leg crossed over the other, his foot swinging a little—even after she burst forth.

"Papa, do you say this to me—to *me*? And I have given him my word, and I love him, though you don't know what that means. Papa, can you look me in the face—me, Stella, and dare to say that you have sent my Charlie away?"

"My dear," said Mr. Tredgold, "he ain't your Charlie, and never will be. He's Sir Charles Somers, Bart., a fine fellow, but I don't think we shall see him here again, and I can look my little Stella quite well in the face."

He did not like to do it, though. He gave her one glance, and then turned his eyes to his paper again.

"Papa," cried Stella, stamping her foot, "I won't have it! I shall not take it from you! Whatever you say, he shall come back here. I won't give him up, no, not if you should shut me up on bread and water—not if you should put me in prison, or drag me by the hair of my head, or kill me! which, I think, is what you must want to do."

"You little hussy! You never had so much as a whipping in your life, and I am not going to begin now. Take her away, Katie. If she cries till Christmas she won't change me. Crying's good for many things, but not for business. Stella, you can go away."

"Oh, papa, how can you say Stella, and be so cruel!" Stella threw herself down suddenly by his side and seized his hand, upon which she laid down her wet cheek. "You have always done everything for Stella. Never—never has my papa refused me anything. I am not used to it. I can't bear it! Papa, it is *me* whose heart you are breaking. Papa, *me*! Stella, it is Stella!"

"Kate, for goodness' sake take her away. It is no use. She is not going to come over me. Stella's a very good name for anything else, but it's not a name in business. Go away, child. Take her away. But, Katie, if there's anything else she would like now, a new carriage, or a horse, or a bracelet, or a lot of dresses, or anything—anything in that way——"

Stella drew herself up to her full height; she dried her eyes; she turned upon her father with that instinct of the drama which is so strong in human nature. "I scorn all your presents; I will take nothing—nothing, as long as I live, you cruel, cruel father," she cried.

Later, when Mr. Tredgold had gone out in his Bath-chair for his afternoon "turn," Stella came back very quietly to his room and gathered up poor Charlie's shillings. She did not know very much about the value of money, though she spent so much; indeed, if she had ever felt the need of it it was in this prosaic form of a few shillings. She thought he might want them, poor Charlie, whom she had not the faintest intention of giving up, whatever papa might say.

CHAPTER XV.

BUT Stella neither shuddered nor hesitated. She was in the highest spirits, flying everywhere, scarcely touching the ground with her feet. "Oh, yes! I'm engaged to Sir Charles," she said to all her friends. "Papa won't hear of it, but he will have to give in."

"Papas always give in when the young people hold out," said some injudicious sympathiser.

"Don't they?" cried Stella, giving a kiss to that lady. She was not in the least discouraged. There was a great deal of gaiety going on at the time, both in the village (as it was fashionable to call the town of Sliplin) and in the county, and Stella met her Charlie everywhere, Mr. Tredgold having no means, and perhaps no inclination, to put a stop to this. He did not want to interfere with her pleasures. If she liked to dance and "go on" with that fellow, let her. She should not marry him; that was all. The old gentleman had no wish to be unkind to his daughter. He desired her to have her fling like the rest, to enjoy herself as much as was possible; only for this one thing he had put down his foot.

"When is that confounded regiment going away?" he asked Katherine.

"Dear papa," Katherine replied, "won't you think it over again? Charlie Somers has perhaps no money, but Stella is very fond of him, and he of——"

"Hold your tongue!" said old Tredgold. "Hold your confounded tongue! If I don't give in to her, do you think it"—with a dash—"likely that I will to you?"

Katherine retreated very quickly, for when her father began to swear she was frightened. He did not swear in an ordinary

way, and visions of apoplexy were associated to her with oaths. Stella did not care. She would have let him swear as long as he liked, and paid no attention. She went to her parties almost every night, glittering in her *rivière* of diamonds and meeting Sir Charles everywhere. They had all the airs of an engaged couple, people said. And it was thought quite natural, for nobody believed that old Tredgold would stand out. Thus, no one gave him any warning of what was going on. The whole island was in a conspiracy on behalf of the lovers. Nor was it like any other abetting of domestic insurrection, for the opinion was unanimous that the father would give in. Why, Stella could do anything with him. Stella was his favourite, as he had shown on every possible occasion. Everybody knew it, even Katherine, who made no struggle against the fact. To think of his having the strength of mind really to deny Stella anything! It was impossible. He was playing with her a little now, only for the pleasure of being coaxed and wheedled, many people thought. But when the time came, of course he would give in. So Stella thought, like everybody else. There was nobody but Katherine and, as I have said, Somers himself who did not feel quite sure. As time went on, the two ladies who went to all the parties and saw everything—the two old cats, Mrs. Shanks and Miss Mildmay—had many consultations on the subject over the invisible rail of separation between their gardens. It was a very bright October, and even the beginning of the next dreary month was far milder than usual and in the mornings, when the sun shone, these ladies were still to be found on their terraces, caressing the last remnants of their flowers, and cutting the last chrysanthemums or dahlias.

"Stella danced every dance last night with that Sir Charles," Miss Mildmay said.

"But she always does, my dear; and why shouldn't she, when she is going to marry him?"

There was really no answer to this, which was so well ascertained a fact, and which everybody knew.

"But I wonder if old Mr. Tredgold knows how much they

are together! As he never goes out himself, it is so easy to keep him deceived. I wonder, Jane Shanks," said Miss Mildmay, "whether you or I should say a word?"

"You may say as many words as you please, Ruth Mildmay; but I shan't," cried the other. "I would not interfere for the world."

"I am not the least afraid of interfering," Miss Mildmay said; and she succeeded in persuading her friend to go out in the midge once more, and call at the Cliff, on an afternoon when the girls were known to be out of the way.

"We ought, I am sure, to congratulate you, Mr. Tredgold. We heard that you did not approve, and, of course, it must be dreadful for you to think of losing Stella; but as it is going on so long, we feel, at last, that the engagement must be true."

"What engagement?" said the old man. He liked to amuse himself with the two old cats. He put his newspaper away and prepared to "get his fun out of them."

"Oh, the engagement between Stella and Sir Charles," said Mrs. Shanks, with bated breath.

"Oh! they're engaged, are they?" he said, with that laugh which was like an electrical bell.

"Dear Mr. Tredgold, it is given out everywhere. They are for ever together. They dance every dance with one another."

"Confounded dull, I should think, for my little girl. You take my word, she'll soon tire of that," he said.

"Oh, but she does not tire of it; you don't go out with them, you don't see things. I assure you they are always together. If you don't approve of it, Mr. Tredgold, indeed—indeed you should put a stop to it. It isn't kind to dear Stella."

"Oh, stop, stop, Ruth Mildmay!" cried Mrs. Shanks. "Stella knows very well just how far she can go. Stella would never do anything that was displeasing to her dear papa. May I pour out the tea for you, dear Mr. Tredgold, as the girls are not in?"

Mr. Tredgold gave the permission with a wave of his hand, and hoped that Miss Mildmay would say just as much as she pleased.

"I like to know what my girls do when they're out," he said. "I like to know that Stella is enjoying herself. That's what they go out for. Just to get themselves as much pleasure as is to be had, in their own way."

"But you would not wish them to compromise themselves," said Miss Mildmay. "Oh, I wouldn't interfere for the world. But as you don't go out with them you ought to be told. I do hope you approve of Sir Charles, Mr. Tredgold. He is a nice young man enough. He has been a little fast; but so have they all; and he is old enough now to have more sense. I am sure he will make you a very good son-in-law. So long as you approve——"

"I approve of my little girl enjoying herself," said the old man. "Bring some more muffins, John; there's plenty in the house, I hope. I know why you won't take that piece, Miss Mildmay, because it is the last in the plate, and you think you will never be married." He accompanied this with a tremendous tinkle of a laugh, as if it were the greatest joke in the world.

Miss Mildmay waved her hand with dignity, putting aside the foolish jest, and also putting aside the new dish of muffins, which that dignity would not permit her to touch.

"The question is," she said, "not my marriage, which does not concern you, Mr. Tredgold, but dear Stella's, which does."

"Mr. Tredgold is so fond of his joke," Mrs. Shanks said.

"Yes, I'm fond of my joke, ain't I? I'm a funny man. Many of the ladies call me so. Lord! I like other people to have their fun too. Stella's welcome to hers, as long as she likes. She's a kitten, she is; she goes on playin' and springin' as long as anybody will fling a bit of string at her. But she's well in hand all the same. She knows, as you say, just how far to go."

"Then she has your approval, we must all presume," said Miss Mildmay, rising from her chair, though Mrs. Shanks had not half finished her tea.

"Oh, she's free to have her fun," Mr. Tredgold said.

What did it mean, her fun? This question was fully dis-

crossed between the two ladies in the midge. Marriage is no fun, if it comes to that, they both agreed, and the phrase was very ambiguous ; but still, no man in his senses, even Mr. Tredgold, could allow his young daughter to make herself so conspicuous if he did not mean to consent in the end.

"I am very glad to hear, Stella, that it is all right about your marriage," Mrs. Shanks said next time she met the girls. "Your papa would not say anything very definite; but still, he knows all about it, and you are to take your own way, as he says."

"Did he say I was to have my own way?" said Stella, in a flush of pleasure.

"At least, he said the same thing. Yes, I am sure that was what he meant. He was full of his jokes, don't you know? But that must have been what he meant; and I am sure I wish you joy with all my heart, Stella, dear."

Stella went dancing home after this, though Katherine walked very gravely by her side.

"I knew papa would give in at last. I knew he never would stand against me, when he knew I was in earnest this time," she cried.

"Do you think he would tell Mrs. Shanks, after sending off both of us, and frightening me?"

"You are so easily frightened," cried Stella. "Yes, I shouldn't wonder at all if he told Mrs. Shanks. He likes the two old cats; he knows they will go and publish it all over the place. He would think I should hear just as soon as if he had told me, and so I have. I will run in and give him a kiss, for he is a dear old soul, after all."

Stella did run in and gave her father a tumultuous kiss, and roused him out of a nap.

"Oh, papa, you dear, you old darling—you best papa in the world!" she cried.

Mr. Tredgold felt a little cross at first, but the kiss and the praises were sweet to him. He put his arms round her as she stood over him.

"What have I done now?" he said, with his tinkling laugh.

"You have done just what I wanted most—what it was dearest of you to do," she cried. "Mrs. Shanks told me. You told her, of course, dear papa, because you knew it would be published directly all over the place."

"Oh, the two old cats!" he said, tinkling more than ever. "That's what they made of it, is it? I said you might have your fun, my dear. You are free to have your fun as much as ever you like. That's what I said, and that's what I shall say as long as you're amusing yourself, Stella. You can have your fling; I shan't stop you. Enjoy yourself as long as you can, if that's what you like," he said.

"Oh, papa, what do you mean—what do you mean?" cried Stella. "Don't you mean, dear papa," she continued, with renewed caresses, putting her arms round his neck, pressing his bald head upon her breast, "that you'll let Charlie come—that he needn't go to India, that we are to be married, and that you'll give us your blessing, and—and everything? That is what you mean, isn't it, dear papa?"

"Don't strangle me, child," he said, coughing and laughing. "There's such a thing, don't you know? as to be killed with kindness. I've told you what I'll do, my dear," he continued. "I shall let you have your fun as long as ever you like. You can dance with him down to the very ship's side, if you please. That won't do any harm to me, but he don't set a foot in this house unless he's ready to table pound for pound with me. Where's his shillin's, by the way, Katie? He ought to have had his shillin's; he might have wanted them, poor man. Ah, don't strangle me, I tell you, Stella!"

"I wish I could!" cried Stella, setting her little teeth. "You deserve it, you old dreadful, dreadful——"

"What is she saying, Kate? Never mind; it was swearing or something, I suppose—all the fault of those old cats, not mine. I said she should have her swing, and she can have her swing and welcome. That's what she wants, I suppose. You have always had your fun, Stella. You don't know what a thing it is to have your fun and nobody to oppose you. I never had that in my life. I was always pulled up sharp.

Get along now, I want my nap before dinner; but mind, I have said all I'm going to say. You can have your fun, and he can table down pound for pound with me, if he has the money—otherwise, not another word. I may be a funny man," said Mr. Tredgold, "but when I put my foot down, none of you will get it up again, that's all I have got to say."

"You are a very hard, cruel, tyrannical father," said Stella, "and you never will have any love from anyone as long as you live!"

"We'll see about that," he said, with a grimace, preparing to fling his handkerchief over his head, which was his way when he went to sleep.

"Oh, papa!—oh, dear papa! Of course I did not mean that. I want no fling and no fun, but to settle down with Charlie, and to be always ready when you want me as long as I live."

"You shall settle down with some man as I approve of, as can count down his hundreds and his thousands on the table, Stella. That's what you are going to do."

"Papa, you never would be so cruel to me, your little Stella? I will have no man if I have not Charlie—never, never, if he had all the money in the world."

"Well, there's no hurry; you're only twenty," he said, blinking at her with sleepy eyes. "I don't want to get rid of you. You may give yourself several years to have your fun before you settle down."

Stella, standing behind her father's bald and defenceless head, looked for a minute or two like a pretty but dreadful demon, threatening him with a raised fist and appalling looks. Suddenly, however, there came a transformation scene—her arms slid round his neck once more; she put her cheek against his bald head. "Papa," she said, her voice faltering between fury and the newly-conceived plan, which, in its way, was fun, "you gave me a kind of an alternative once. You said, if I didn't have Charlie——"

"Well?" said the old man, waking up, with a gleam of amusement in his eyes.

"I could have—you said it yourself—anything else I liked," said Stella, drooping over the back of his chair. Was she ashamed of herself, or was she secretly overcome with something, either laughter or tears?

"Stella," cried Katherine, "do come away now and let papa rest." The elder sister's face was full of alarm, but for what she was frightened she could scarcely herself have said.

"Let her get it out," cried Mr. Tredgold. "Speak up, Stella, my little girl; out with it, my pet. What would it like from its papa?"

"You said I might have anything I liked—more diamonds, a lot of new dresses——"

"And so you shall," he said, chuckling, till it was doubtful if he would ever recover his breath. "That's my little girl down to the ground—that's my pet! That's the woman all over—just the woman I like! You shall have all that—diamonds? Yes, if I'd to send out to wherever they come from. And frocks? As many as you can set your face to. Give me a kiss, Stella, and that's a bargain, my dear."

"Very well, papa," said Stella, with dignity, heaving a soft sigh. "You will complete the parure, please; a handsome pendant, and a star for my hair, and a bracelet—but handsome, really good, fit for one of the princesses."

"As good as they make 'em, Stella."

"And I must have them," she said languidly, "for that ball that is going to be given to the regiment before they go away. As for the dresses," she added, with more energy, "papa, I shall fleccc you—I shall rob you! I will order everything I take a fancy to—everything that is nice, everything that is dear. I shall ruin you!" she cried, clapping her hands together with a sound like a pistol-shot over his head.

Through all this the tinkling of his laugh had run on. It burst out now and had a little solo of its own, disturbed by a cough, while the girls were silent and listened. "That's the sort of thing," he cried. "That's my Stella—that's my pet! Ruin me! I can stand it. Have them as dear as they're

made. I'll write for the diamonds to-night; and you shall go to the ball all shinin' from head to foot, my Stella—that's what you've always been since you were born—my little star!"

Then she pulled the handkerchief over his head, gave him a kiss through it, and hurried away.

"Oh, Stella, Stella!" cried Katherine under her breath. She repeated the words when they had gone into their own room. Stella, flushed and excited, had thrown herself upon the stool before the piano and began to play wildly, with jars and crashes of sound. "Oh, Stella, how dared you do such a thing? How dared you barter away your love, for he is your love, for diamonds and frocks? Oh, Stella, you are behaving very, very badly. I am not fond of Charles Somers; but surely, if you care for him at all, he is worth more than that. And how dared you—how dared you sell him—to papa?"

But Stella said never a word. She went on playing wild chords and making crashes of dreadful sound, which, to Katherine, who was more or less a musician, were beyond bearing. She seized her sister's arm after a moment and stopped her almost violently. "Stop that, stop that, and answer me!" she cried.

"Don't you like my music, Kate? It was all out of my own head—what you call improvising. I thought you would like me to go to the piano for comfort. So it is an ease to one's mind—it lets the steam off," cried Stella with a last crash, louder and more discordant than the others. Then she abandoned the piano and threw herself down in a chair.

"Wasn't that a funny talk I had with papa? You may tell Charlie, if you like, it will amuse him so. They would all think it the most glorious. I shall tell it to everybody when I am on the——"

Here Stella stopped, and gave her sister a half-inquiring, half-malicious look, but found no response in Katherine's grieved eyes.

"I don't know what you mean, Stella," she said. "If you

mean what papa thinks, it is the most odious, humiliating bargain; if you mean something else, it is—but I can't say what it is, for I don't know what you mean. You are going to be a traitor one way or else another, either to Charlie or to papa. I don't know which is worse, to break that man's heart (for he is fond of you) by throwing him over at the last moment, or to steal papa's money and break his heart too."

"You needn't trouble yourself so much about people's hearts, Kate. How do you know that Charlie would have me if he thought papa wouldn't give in? And, as for papa's heart, he would only have to give in, and then all would be right. It isn't such a complicated matter as you think. You are so fond of making out that things are complicated. I think them quite simple. Papa has just to make up his mind which he likes best, me or his money. He thinks he likes his money best. Well, perhaps later he will find he doesn't, and then he has only got to change. Where's the difficulty? As for me, you must just weave webs about me as long as you please. I am not complicated—not a bit. I shall do what I like best. I am not sure even now which I like best, but I shall know when the time comes. And in the meantime I am laying up all the best evidence to judge from. I shall send Stevers up to town for patterns to-morrow. I shall get the very richest and the very dearest things that Madame has or can get. Oh," cried the girl, clapping her hands with true enjoyment, "what fun it will be!"

CHAPTER XVI.

EVERYTHING now began to converge towards the great ball which was to be given in Sliplin to the regiment before it went off to India. It was in its little way something like that great Brussels ball which came before Waterloo. They were to embark next morning, these heroic soldiers. If they were not going to fight, they were at least going to dare the dangers of the deep in a troop-ship, which is not comfortable; and they were fully impressed with their own importance as the heroes of the moment. Lady Jane was at the head of the undertaking, along with certain other magnates of the neighbourhood. Without them I doubt whether the Sliplin people proper would have felt it necessary to give the Chestnuts a ball; the officers had never been keen about the village parties. They had gone to the Cliff, where everything smelt of gold, but they had not cared for those little entertainments—for lawn tennis in the summer and other mild dissipations at which their presence would have been an excitement and delight. So that the good people in Sliplin had looked rather coldly upon the suggestion at first. When it was settled, however, and the greatness of the event was realised, the Sliplin people warmed up into interest. A ball is a ball, however it is brought about.

Mr. Tredgold subscribed liberally, and so of course Stella and Katherine had been "in it" from the very first. They took the greatest interest in the decorations, running up and down to the great hall in which it was to be held, and superintending everything. Mrs. Shanks and Miss Mildmay also looked in a great many times in a day, and so did many other of the Sliplin ladies, moved at last to "take an interest"

when it was no longer possible that it should cost them anything.

"I hear they have plenty of money for everything—too much indeed—so it is just as well that we did not come forward. If we had come forward I don't know what the lists would have risen to. As it is, I hear there is almost too much. Mr. Tredgold insists upon champagne—oceans of champagne. I am sure I hope that the young men will behave properly. I don't approve of such rivers of wine. If they are fond of dancing, surely they can enjoy their dancing without that."

This is a very general opinion among the ladies of country towns, and gives a fine disinterested aspect to the pursuit of dancing for its own sake; but no doubt the Chestnuts liked it better when there were oceans of champagne.

It had been known all along in the place that Stella Tredgold meant to surpass herself on this occasion, which was a matter calling forth much astonishment and speculation among her friends. It was also known, more or less, that Sir Charles Somers had made his proposals to her father and had been refused. All his own friends were well aware of the fact, and it was not to be supposed that it should be a secret at Sliplin. Sir Charles had been refused by Mr. Tredgold because he had no money, not by Stella, who was very much in love with him, everybody said, as he was with her. It was enough to see them together to be convinced of that. And yet she meant to be the gayest of the gay at the ball on the eve of parting with him! Some of the girls expected and hoped that evidences of a broken heart would be visible even under the lovely white dress and wonderful diamonds in which she was understood to be going to appear. So ridiculous for a girl of her age to wear diamonds, the elder ladies said; and they did not think there would be any evidences of a broken heart. "She has no heart, that little thing; Lord Uffington will be there, and she will go in for him, now that Sir Charles has failed." It must be admitted it was strange that she should show so much delight in this ball and proclaim her intention of being dressed more gorgeously than she had ever been in

her life on the eve of parting with her lover. Was it to leave such an impression on his mind that he never should forget her? was it to show she didn't care? But nobody could tell. Stella had always been an odd girl, they said, though indeed I do not think that this was true.

She was very much occupied on the day of the ball, still looking after these decorations, and even made a dash across the country in her own little brougham in the morning to get one particular kind of white chrysanthemum which only grew in a cottage garden in the middle of the island. She returned from this wild expedition about noon with the brougham filled with the flowers, and a great air of triumph and excitement. "Wasn't it clever of me?" she cried. "I just remembered. We saw them, don't you recollect, Kate? the last time we were out that way. They were just the things that were wanted for the head of the room. I flew to the stables and called Andrews, and we were there—oh, I can't tell you how soon."

"Nice thing for my horse," said Mr. Tredgold. "He's a young devil, that Andrews boy. I shall give him the sack if he doesn't mind."

"It is my horse," said Stella; "the brougham's mine, and the boy's mine. You forget what you said, papa."

"There never was an extortioner like this little——" said Mr. Tredgold, chuckling; "drives her horse to death and then feeds him with sugar—just like women—it's what they all do."

"I think," said Katherine, "you might have found some chrysanthemums nearer home."

"But you see I didn't," said Stella, with her usual impatience, breaking into song and tossing her shining head as she walked away.

"Doesn't make much of the parting, and that fellow off to India, does she?" said her father. "I knew how it would be; I never believe in a girl's swagger, bless you. She's very fond of one man till she sees another. You'll find my lord will make all the running to-night."

"And if Lord Uffington should propose for Stella," said Katherine with her grave air, "which I don't think very likely, but, still, from your point of view, papa, would you insist upon the same test with my lord—as you call him—pound for pound on the table as you say, and that sort of thing?"

"Certainly I should—if he was a Royal Dook," Mr. Tredgold said.

"Then it is a pity," said Katherine; but she said no more, nor would any question bring forth the end of her sentence. She went out and took a walk along the cliff, where there was that beautiful view. It was a very fine day, one of those matchless days of early winter which are perhaps the most beautiful of English weather. The sun was blazing, calling forth the dazzling whiteness of that sharp cliff which was the furthest point to the east, and lighting every wave as with the many coloured facets of a diamond. There were one or two boats out, lying in the light, or moving softly with the slight breeze, which was no more than a little movement in the celestial air—as if suspended between earth and heaven. And to think it was November, that grim month in which everything is dismal! I don't think Katherine was thinking very much about the view, but she was soothed by it in the multitude of her thoughts.

She was out there again very late, between one and two in the morning, after the ball. Stella had wanted to leave early, and would fain have escaped before her sister. But Katherine balked her in this, without having any particular reason for it. She felt only that when Stella went away she must go too, and that though she had seemed so indifferent there was now a great deal of excitement in Stella's gaiety, which was so unrestrained. They went off accordingly, leaving a crowd of disappointed partners shouting complaints and good-nights after them. When they entered the drive, where a sleepy woman came forth from the lodge to let them in, Katherine noticed a dark figure which stole in with the carriage.

"Who is that?" she said.

"Oh, Katie, Katie dear, don't say anything!" cried Stella,

putting a hand upon her mouth. "It is Charlie come to say good-bye. I must say one little word to him before he goes; do you think that I am made of stone?"

"Oh, no, no!" cried Katherine. "I have been wondering—I thought you had got over—I didn't know what to think."

"I shall never get over it," said Stella, vehemently. She was crying with her head against her sister's shoulder. "Oh, Kate, don't be hard upon me, or say anything! I must—I must have one little half hour with Charlie before he goes away."

"Indeed—indeed, I shall not say anything! I do feel for you, Stella. I am sorry for him. But, oh, don't stay long, dear, it will only prolong the trouble. And it is so late, and people might say——"

"How could people say if they didn't know? And, Katie," cried her sister, "if you stay here to watch over us, while I bid him—I mean talk to him yonder—what could anyone say? Won't it be enough to quench every evil tongue if you are there?"

"I suppose it will," said Katherine dubiously.

She got down very dubiously from the brougham, from which Stella had sprung like an arrow. And Andrews, who drove the warm little carriage which was Stella's, as he was more or less Stella's man, turned immediately and drove away, no doubt to relieve the gatekeeper, who was waiting to close up after him. A sleepy footman had opened the door, and stood waiting while Katherine, in her white cloak, lingered in the porch. The fire was still burning in the hall, and the lamp bright. Katherine told the man to go to bed, and that she would herself fasten the door, and then she turned to the glory of the night, and the lawn, and all the shrubberies, looking like frosted silver in the moonlight. Stella had disappeared somewhere among the shadows with her lover. Katherine heard a faint sound of steps, and thought she could perceive still a gleam of whiteness among the trees. She stepped out herself upon the walk. It sounded a little crisp under her foot,

for there was frost in the air. The moon was glorious, filling earth and heaven with light, and flinging the blackest shadows into all the corners. And the stillness was such that the dropping of one of those last yellow leaves slowly down through the air was like an event. She was warmly wrapped up in her fur cloak, and, though the hour was eerie, the night was beautiful, and the house with its open door, and the glow of the red fire, and the light of the lamp, gave protection and fellowship. All the rare trees, though sufficiently hardy to bear it, had shrunk a little before that pennyworth of frost, though it was really nothing, not enough to bind the moisture in a little hollow of the path, which Katherine had to avoid as she walked up and down in her satin shoes. After a while she heard the little click of the door at the foot of the steep path which led to the beach, and concluded that Stella had let her lover out that way, and would soon join her. But Katherine was in no hurry; she was not cold, and she had never been out, she thought, in so lovely a night. It carried her away to many thoughts: I will not venture to allege that James Stanford was not one of them. It would have been strange if she had not thought of him in these circumstances. She had never had the chance of saying farewell to him; he had been quenched at once by her father, and he had not had the spirit to come back, which, she supposed, Sir Charles had. He had disappeared and made no sign. Stella was more lucky than she was in every way. Poor Stella! who must just have gone through one of the most terrible of separations! "Partings that press the life from out young hearts!" Who was it that said that? But still it must be better to have the parting than that he should disappear like a shadow without a word, and be no more seen or heard of—as if he were dead. And perhaps he was dead, for anything she knew.

But, what a long time Stella was coming back! If she had let him out at that door, she surely should have found her way up the cliff before now. Katherine turned in that direction, and stood still at the top of the path and listened, but could hear nothing. Perhaps she had been mistaken about the

click of the door. It was very dark in that deep shadow—too dark to penetrate into the gloom by herself without a lantern, especially as, after all, she was not quite sure that Stella had gone that way. She must at least wait a little longer before making any search which might betray her sister. She turned back again, accordingly, along the round of the broad cliff with its feathering edge of tamarisks. Oh, what a wonderful world of light and stillness! The white cliff to the east shone and flamed in the moonlight; it was like a tall ghost between the blue sea and the blue sky, both of them so indescribably blue—the little ripple breaking the monotony of one, the hosts of stars half veiled in the superior radiance of the moon diversifying the other. She had never been out on such a beautiful night. It was a thing to remember. She felt that she should never forget (though she certainly was not fond of him at all) the night of Charlie Somers's departure—the night of the ball, which had been the finest Sliplin had ever known.

As Katherine moved along she heard in the distance, beginning to make a little roll of sound, the carriages of the people going away. She must have been quite a long time there when she perceived this; the red fire in the hall was only a speck now. A little anxious, she went back again to the head of the path. She even ventured a few steps down into the profound blackness. "Stella!" she cried in a low voice, "Stella!" Then she added, still in a kind of whisper, "Come back, oh, come back; it is getting so late."

But she got no reply. There were various little rustlings, and one sound as of a branch that crushed under a step, but no step was audible. Could they be too engrossed to hear her, or was Stella angry or miserable, declining to answer? Katherine, in great distress, threaded her way back among the trees that seemed to get in her way and take pleasure in striking against her, as if they thought her false to her sister. She was not false to Stella, she declared to herself indignantly; but this was too long — she should not have stayed so long. Katherine began to feel cold, with a chill that was not of the night. And then there sounded into the clear shining air the stroke of

the hour. She had never heard it so loud before. She felt that it must wake all the house, and bring every one out to see if the girls had not come back. It would wake papa, who was not a very good sleeper, and betray everything. Three ! “Stella, Stella ! oh, for goodness’ sake, don’t stay any longer !” cried Katherine, making a sort of funnel of her two hands, and sending her voice down into the dark.

After all, she said to herself, presently, three was not late for a ball. The rest of the people were only beginning to go away. And a parting which might be for ever ! “It may be for years, and it may be for ever.” The song came into her mind and breathed itself all about her, as a song has a way of doing. Poor things, poor young things ! and perhaps they might never see each other again. “Partings that press the life from out young hearts.” Katherine turned with a sigh and made a little round of the cliff again, without thinking of the view. And then she turned suddenly to go back, and looked out upon the wonderful round of the sea and sky.

There was something new in it now, something that had not been there before — a tall white sail, like something glorified, like an angel with one foot on the surface of the waves, and one high white wing uplifted. She stood still with a sort of breathless admiration and rapture. Sea and sky had been wonderful before, but they had wanted just that — the white softly moving sail, the faint line of the boat. Where was it she had seen just that before, suddenly coming into sight while she was watching ? It was when the *Stella*, when Stella — good heavens ! — the *Stella*, and Stella——

Katherine uttered a great cry, and ran wildly towards the house. And then she stopped herself and went back to the cliff and gazed again. It might only be a fishing-boat made into a wonderful thing by the moonlight. When she looked again it had already made a great advance in the direction of the white cliff, to the east ; it was crossing the bay, gliding very smoothly on the soft waves. The *Stella* — could it be the *Stella* ? — and where was her sister ? She gathered up her long white dress more securely and plunged down the dark

path towards the beach. The door was locked, there was not a sound anywhere.

"Stella!" she cried, louder than ever. "Stella! where are you?" but nobody heard, not even in the sleeping house, where surely there must be some one waking who could help her. This made her remember that Stevens, the maid, must be waking, or at least not in bed. She hurried in, past the dying fire in the hall, and up the silent stairs, the sleeping house so still that the creak of a plank under her feet sounded like a shriek. But there was no Stevens to be found, neither in the young ladies' rooms where she should have been, nor in her own; everything was very tidy, there was not a brush nor a pocket-handkerchief out of place, and the trim, white bed was not even prepared for any inhabitant. It was as if it were a bed of death.

Then Katherine bethought her to go again to the gardener's wife in the lodge, who had a lantern. She had been woke up before, perhaps it was less harm to wake her up again (this was not logical, but Katherine was above logic). Finally, the woman was roused, and her husband along with her, and the lantern lighted, and the three made a circle of the shrubberies. There was nothing to be found there. The man declared that the door was not only locked but jammed, so that it would be very hard to open it, and he unhesitatingly swore that it was the *Stella* which was now gliding round beyond the Bunbridge cliffs.

"How do you know it is the *Stella*? It might be any yacht," cried Katherine.

The man did not condescend to make any explanation. "I just knows it," he said.

It was proved presently by this messenger, despatched in haste to ascertain, that the *Stella* was gone from the pier, and there was nothing more to be said.

The sight of these three, hunting in every corner, filling the grounds with floating gleams of light, and voices and steps no longer subdued, while the house lay open full of sleep, the lamp burning in the hall but nobody stirring, was a strange

sight. At length there was a sound heard in the silent place. A window was thrown open, a night-capped head was thrust into the air.

"What the deuce is all this row about?" cried the voice of Mr. Tredgold. "Who's there? Look out for yourselves, whoever you are; I'm not going to have strangers in my garden at this hour of the night."

And the old man, startled, put a climax to the confusion by firing wildly into space. The gardener's wife gave a shriek and fell, and the house suddenly woke up, with candles moving from window to window, and men and women calling out in different tones of fury and affright, "Who is there? Who is there?"

CHAPTER XVII.

Not only Sliplin, but the entire island was in commotion next day. Stella Tredgold had disappeared in the night, in her ball dress, which was the most startling detail, and seized the imagination of the community as nothing else could have done. Those of them who had seen her, so ridiculously overdressed for a girl of her age, sparkling with diamonds from head to foot, as some of these spectators said, represented to themselves with the dismayed delight of excitement that gleaming figure in the white satin dress which many people had remarked was like a wedding dress, the official apparel of a bride. In this wonderful garb she had stolen away down the dark private path from the Cliff to the beach, and got round somehow over the sands and rocks to the little harbour; and, while her sister was waiting for her on the cold cliff in the moonlight, had put out to sea and fled away—Stella the girl, and *Stella* the yacht, no one knew where. Was it her wedding dress, indeed? or had she, the misguided, foolish creature, flung herself into Charlie Somers's life without any safeguard, trusting to the honour of a man like that, who was a profligate and without honour, as everybody knew.

No one, however, except the most pessimistic—who always exist in every society, and think the worst, and alas! prove in so many cases right, because they always think the worst—believed in this. Indeed, it would be only right to say that nobody believed Stella to have run away to shame. There was a conviction in the general mind that a marriage licence, if not a marriage certificate, had certainly formed part of her baggage; and nobody expected that her father would be able to drag her back “by the hair of her head,” as it was believed

the furious old man intended to do. Mr. Tredgold's fury passed all bounds, it was universally said. He had discharged a gun into the group on the lawn, who were searching for Stella in the shrubberies (*most* absurd of them!), and wounded, it was said, the gardener's wife, who kept the lodge, and who had taken to her bed and made the worst of it, as such a person would naturally do. And then he had stood at the open window in his dressing-gown, shouting orders to the people as they appeared—always under the idea that burglars had got into the grounds.

"Have the girls come back? Is Stella asleep? Don't let them disturb my little Stella! Don't let them frighten my pet," he had cried, while all the servants ran and bobbed about with lanterns and naked candles, flaring and blowing out, and not knowing what they were looking for. A hundred details were given of this scene, which no outsider had witnessed, which the persons involved were not conscious of, but which were nevertheless true. Even what Katherine said to her father crept out somehow, though certainly neither he nor she reported the details of that curious scene.

When she had a little organised the helpless body of servants and told them as far as she could think what to do—which was for half of them at least to go back to bed and keep quiet; when she had sent a man she could trust to make inquiries about the *Stella* at the pier, and another to fetch a doctor for the woman who considered herself to be dying, though she was, in fact, not hurt at all, and who made a diversion for which Katherine was thankful, she went indoors with Mrs. Simmons, the housekeeper, who was a person of some sense and not helpless in an emergency as the others were. And Mrs. Simmons had really something to tell. She informed Katherine as they went in together through the cold house, where the candles they carried made faintly visible the confusion of rooms abandoned for the night, with the ashes of last night's fires in the grate, and last night's occupations in every chair carelessly pushed aside, and table heaped with newspapers and trifles, that she had been misdoubting as something

was up with Stevens at least. Stevens was the point at which the story revealed itself to Mrs. Simmons. She had been holding her head very high, the little minx. She had been going on errands and carrying letters as nobody knew where they were to; and yesterday was that grand she couldn't contain herself, laughing and smiling to herself and dressed up in her very best. She had gone out quite early after breakfast on the day of the ball to get some bit of ribbon she wanted, but never came back till past twelve, when she came in the brougham with Miss Stella, and laughing so with her mistress in her room (you were out, Miss Katherine) as it wasn't right for a maid to be carrying on like that. And out again as soon as you young ladies was gone to the ball, and never come back, not so far as Mrs. Simmons knew. "Oh, I've misdoubted as there was something going on," the housekeeper said. Katherine, who was shivering in the dreadful chill of the house in the dead of night, in the confusion of this sudden trouble, was too much depressed and sick at heart to ask why she had not been told of these suspicions. And then her father's voice calling to her was audible coming down the stairs. He stood at the head of the staircase, a strange figure in his dressing-gown and night-cap, with a candle held up in one hand and his old gun embraced in the other arm.

"Who's there?" he cried, staring down in the darkness. "Who's there? Have you got 'em?—have you got 'em? Damn the fellows, and you too, for keeping me waitin'!" He was foaming at the mouth, or at least sending forth jets of moisture in his excitement. Then he gave vent to a sort of broken shout—"Kath-i-rine!" astonishment and sudden terror driving him out of familiarity into her formal name.

"Yes, papa, I am coming. Go back to your room. I will tell you everything—or, at least, all I know." She was vaguely thankful in her heart that the doctor would be there, that there would be some one to fall back upon if it made him ill. Katherine seemed by this time to have all feeling deadened in her. If she could only have gone to her own room and lain down and forgotten everything, above all, that

Stella was not there breathing softly within the ever-open door between! She stopped a moment, in spite of herself, at the window on the landing which looked out upon the sea, and there, just rounding the white cliff, was that moving speck of whiteness sharing in the intense illumination of the moonlight, which even as she looked disappeared, going out of sight in a minute as if it had been a cloud or a dream.

"Have they got 'em, Katie? and what were you doing there at this time of night, out on the lawn in your—George!" cried the old man—"in your ball finery? Have you just come back? Why, it's near five in the morning. What's the meaning of all this? Is Stella in her bed safe? And what in the name of wonder are you doing here?"

"Papa," said Katherine in sheer disability to enter on the real subject, "you have shot the woman."

"Damn the woman!" he cried.

"And there were no burglars," she said with a sob. The cold, moral and physical, had got into her very soul. She drew her fur cloak more closely about her, but it seemed to give no warmth, and then she dropped upon her knees by the cold fireplace, in which, as in all the rest, there was nothing but the ashes of last night's fire. Mr. Tredgold stood leaning on the mantel-piece, and he was cold too. He bade her tell him in a moment what was the matter, and what she had been doing out of the house at this hour of the night—with a tremulous roar.

"Papa! oh, how can I tell you! It is Stella—Stella——"

"What!" he cried. "Stella ill? Stella ill? Send for the doctor. Call up Simmons. What is the matter with the child? Is it anything bad that you look so distracted? Good Lord—my Stella!"

"Oh, have patience, sir," said Mrs. Simmons, coming in with wood to make a fire; "there'll be news of her by the morning—sure there'll be news by the morning. Miss Katherine have done everything. And the sea is just like a mill-pond, and her own gentlemen to see to her——"

"The sea?" cried the old man. "What has the sea to do

with my Stella?" He aimed a clumsy blow at the house-keeper, kneeling in front of the fire, with the butt end of the gun he still had in his hand, in his unreflecting rage. "You old hag! what do you know about my Stella?" he cried.

Mrs. Simmons did not feel the blow which Katherine diverted, but she was wounded by the name, and rose up with dignity, though not before she had made a cheerful blaze. "I meant to have brought you some tea, Miss Katherine, but if Master is going on with his abuse—— He did ought to think a little bit of *you* as are far more faithful. What do I know—— more than that innocent lamb does of all their goings on?"

"Katie," cried Mr. Tredgold, "put that wretched woman out by the shoulders. And why don't you go to your sister? Doesn't Stella go before everything? Have you sent for the doctor? Where's the doctor? And can't you tell me what is the matter with my child?"

"If I'm a wretched woman," cried Mrs. Simmons, "I ain't fit to be at the head of your servants, Mr. Tredgold; and I'm quite willing to go this day month, sir, for it's a hard place, though very likely better now Miss Stella's gone. As for Miss Stella, sir, it's no doctor, but maybe a clergyman as she is wanting; for she is off with her gentleman as sure as I am standing here."

Mr. Tredgold gave an inarticulate cry, and felt vaguely for the gun which was still within his arm; but he missed hold of it and it fell on the floor, where the loaded barrel went off, scattering small shot into all the corners. Mrs. Simmons flew from the room with a conviction, which never left her, that she had been shot at, to meet the trembling household flocking from all quarters to know the meaning of this second report. Katherine, whose nerves were nearly as much shaken as those of Mrs. Simmons, and who could not shut out from her mind the sensation that some one must have been killed, shut the door quickly, she hardly knew why; and then she came back to her father, who was lying back very pale, and looking as if he were the person wounded, on the cushions of his great chair.

"What—what—does she mean?" he half said, half looked.
"Is—is—it true?"

"Oh, papa!" cried Katherine, kneeling before him, trying to take his hand. "I am afraid, I am afraid——"

He pushed her off furiously. "You—afraid!" Impossible to describe the scorn with which he repeated this word. "Is it—is it true?"

Katherine could make no reply, and he wanted none, for thereupon he burst into a roar of oaths and curses which beat down on her head like a hailstorm. She had never heard the like before, not anything in the least resembling it. She tried to grasp at his hands, which he dashed into the air in his fury, right and left. She called out his name, pulled at his arm in the same vain effort. Then she sprang to her feet, crying out that she could not bear it—that it was a horror and a shame. Katherine's cloak fell from her; she stood, a vision of white, with her uncovered shoulders and arms, confronting the old man, who, with his face distorted like that of a demoniac, sat volleying forth curses and imprecations. Katherine had never been so splendidly adorned as Stella, but a much smaller matter will make a girl look wonderful in all her whiteness shining, in the middle of the gloom against the background of heavy curtains and furniture, at such a moment of excitement and dismay. It startled the doctor as he came in, as with the effect of a scene in a play. And indeed he had a totally different impression of Katherine, who had always been kept a little in the shade of the brightness of Stella, from that day.

"Well," he said, coming in, energetic but calm, into the midst of all this agitation, with a breath of healthful freshness out of the night, "what is the matter here? I have seen the woman, Miss Katherine, and she is really not hurt at all. If it had touched her eyes, though, it might have been bad enough. Hullo! the gun again—gone off of itself this time, eh? I hope you are not hurt—nor your father."

"We are in great trouble," said Katherine. "Papa has been very much excited. Oh, I am so glad—so glad you have come, doctor! Papa——"

"Eh? what's the matter? Come, Mr. Tredgold, you must get into bed—not a burglar about, I assure you, and the man on the alert. What do you say? Oh, come, come, my friend, you mustn't swear."

To think he should treat as a jest that torrent of oaths that had made Katherine tremble and shrink more than anything else that had happened! It brought her, like a sharp prick, back to herself.

"Don't speak to me, d—— you," cried the old man. "D—— you all—d——"

"Yes," said the doctor, "cursed be the whole concern, I know—and a great relief to your mind, I shouldn't wonder. But now there's been enough of that and you must get to bed."

He made Katherine a sign to go away, and she was thankful beyond expression to do so, escaping into her own room, where there was a fire, and where the head housemaid, very serious, waited to help her to undress—"As Stevens, you are aware, Miss Katherine, 'as gone away." The door of the other room was open, the gleam of firelight visible within. Oh, was it possible—was it possible that Stella was not there, that she was gone away without a sign, out on the breadths of the moonlit sea, from whence she might never come again? Katherine had not realised this part of the catastrophe till now. "I think I can manage by myself, Thompson," she said faintly; "don't let me keep you out of bed."

"Oh, there's no question of bed now for us, Miss," said Thompson with emphasis; "it's only an hour or two earlier than usual, that's all. We'll get the more forwarder with our work—if any one can work, with messengers coming and going, and news arriving, and all this trouble about Miss Stella. I'm sure, for one, I couldn't close my eyes."

Katherine vaguely wondered within herself if she were of more common clay than Thompson, as she had always been supposed to be of more common clay than her sister; for she felt that she would be very glad to close her eyes and forget for a moment all this trouble. She said in a faint voice, "We

do not know anything about Miss Stella, Thompson, as yet. She may have gone—up to Steephill with Lady Jane."

"Oh, I know, Miss, very well where she's gone. She's gone to that big ship as sails to-morrow with all the soldiers. How she could do it, along of all those men, I can't think. I'm sure I couldn't do it," cried Thompson. "Oh, I had my doubts what all them notes and messages was coming to, and Stevens that proud she wouldn't speak a word to nobody. Well, I always thought as Stevens was your maid, Miss Katherine, as you're the eldest; but I don't believe she have done a thing for you."

"Oh, she has done all I wanted. I don't like very much attendance. Now that you have undone these laces, you may go. Thank you very much, Thompson, but I really do not want anything more."

"I'll go and get you some tea, Miss Katherine," the woman said. Another came to the door before she had been gone a minute. They were all most eager to serve the remaining daughter of the house, and try to pick up a scrap of news, or to state their own views at the same time. This one put in her head at the door and said in a hoarse confidential whisper, "Andrews could tell more about it than most, Miss, if you'd get hold of him."

"Andrews!" said Katherine.

"He always said he was Miss Stella's man, and he's drove her a many places—oh, a many places—as you never knowed of. You just ast him where he took her yesterday mornin', Miss?"

At this point Thompson came back, and drove the other skurrying away.

When Katherine went back, in the warm dressing-gown which was so comfortable, wrapping her round like a friend, to her father's room, she found the old man in bed, very white and tremulous after his passion, but quiet, though his lips still moved and his cruel little red eyes shone. Katherine had never known before that they were cruel eyes, but the impression came upon her now with a force that made her shiver;

they were like the eyes of a wild creature, small and impotent, which would fain have killed but could not—with a red glare in them, unwinking, fixed, full of malice and fury. The doctor explained to her, standing by the fireplace, what he had done; while Katherine, listening, saw across the room those fiery small eyes watching the conversation as if they could read what it was in her face. She could not take her own eyes away, nor refuse to be investigated by that virulent look.

"I have given him a strong composing draught. He'll go to sleep presently, and the longer he sleeps the better. He has got his man with him, which is the best thing for him; and now about you, Miss Katherine." He took her hand with that easy familiarity of the medical man which his science authorises, and in which there is often as much kindness as science. "What am I to do for you?"

"Oh, nothing, doctor, unless you can suggest something. Oh, doctor, it is of no use trying to conceal it from you—my sister is gone!" She melted suddenly, not expecting them at all, thinking herself incapable of them—into tears.

"I know, I know," he said. "It is a great shock for you, it is very painful; but if, as I hear, he was violently against the marriage, and she was violently determined on it, was not something of the kind to be expected? You know your sister was very much accustomed to her own way."

"Oh, doctor, how can you say that!—as if you took it for granted—as if it was not the most terrible thing that could happen! Eloped, only imagine it! Stella! in her ball dress, and with that man!"

"I hope there is nothing very bad about the man," said the doctor with hesitation.

"And how are we to get her back? The ship sails to-morrow. If she is once carried away in the ship, she will never, never—— Oh, doctor, can I go? who can go? What can we do? Do tell me something, or I will go out of my senses," she cried.

"Is there another room where we can talk? I think he is going to sleep," said the doctor.

Katherine, in her distress, had got beyond the power of the terrible eyes on the bed, which still gleamed, but fitfully. Her father did not notice her as she went out of the room. And by this time the whole house was astir—fires lighted in all the rooms—to relieve the minds of the servants, it is to be supposed, for nobody knew why. The tray that had been carried to her room was brought downstairs, and there by the perturbed fire of a winter morning, burning with preternatural vigilance and activity as if eager to find out what caused it, she poured out the hot tea for the doctor, and he ate bread and butter with the most wholesome and hearty appetite—which was again a very curious scene.

The Tredgolds were curiously without friends. There was no uncle, no intimate to refer to, who might come and take the lead in such an emergency. Unless Katherine could have conducted such inquiries herself, or sent a servant, there was no one nearer than the doctor, or perhaps the vicar, who had always been so friendly. He and she decided between them that the doctor should go off at once, or at least as soon as there was a train to take him, to the great ship which was to embark the regiment early that morning, to discover whether Sir Charles Somers was there; while the vicar, whom he could see and inform in the meantime, should investigate the matter at home and at Steephill. The gardener, a trustworthy man, had, as soon as his wife was seen to be “out of danger,” as they preferred to phrase it—“scarcely hurt at all,” as the doctor said—been sent off to trace the *Stella*, driving in a dog-cart to Bunbridge, which was the nearest port she was likely to put in at. By noon the doctor thought they would certainly have ascertained among them all that was likely to be ascertained. He tried to comfort Katherine’s mind by an assurance that no doubt there would be a marriage, that Somers, though he had not a good character, would never—but stopped with a kind of awe, perceiving that Katherine had no suspicion of the possibility of any other ending, and condemning himself violently as a fool for putting any such thought into her head; but he had not put any such thought in her head, which was inca-

pable of it. She had no conception of anything that could be worse than the elopement. He hastened to take refuge in something she did understand. "All this on one condition," he said, "that you go to bed and try to sleep. I will do nothing unless you promise this, and you can do nothing for your sister. There is nothing to be done; gazing out over the sea won't bring the yacht back. You must promise me that you will try to go to sleep. You will if you try."

"Oh, yes, I will go to sleep," Katherine said. She reflected again that she was of commoner clay than Thompson, who could not have closed an eye.

CHAPTER XVIII.

It proved not at all difficult to find out everything, or almost everything, about the runaway pair. The doctor's mission, though it seemed likely to be the most important of all, did not produce very much. In the bustle of the embarkation he had found it difficult to get any information at all, but eventually he had found Captain Scott, whom he had attended during his illness, and whom he now sent peremptorily down below out of the cold. "If that's your duty, you must not do it, that's all," he had said with the decision of a medical man, though whether he had secured his point or not, Katherine, ungratefully indifferent to Algy, did not ascertain. But he found that Sir Charles Somers had got leave and was going out with a P. and O. from Brindisi to join his regiment when it should reach India.

"It will cost him the eyes out of his head," Algy said. "Lucky beggar, he don't mind what he spends now."

"Why?" the doctor asked, and was laughed at for not knowing that Charlie had run off with old Tredgold's daughter, who was good for any amount of money, and, of course, would soon give in and receive the pair back again into favour. "Are you so sure of that?" the doctor said. And Algy had replied that his friend would be awfully up a tree if it didn't turn out so. The doctor shook his head in relating this story to Katherine. "I have my doubts," he said; but she knew nothing on that subject, and was thinking of nothing but of Stella herself, and the dreadful thought that she might see her no more.

The vicar, on his side, had been busy with his inquiries too, and he had found out everything with the greatest ease; in the first place from Andrews, the young coachman, who declared

that he had always taken his orders from Miss Stella, and didn't know as he was doing no wrong. Andrews admitted very frankly that he had driven his young mistress to the little church, one of the very small primitive churches of the island near Steephill, where the tall gentleman with the dark moustaches had met her, and where Miss Stevens had turned up with a big basketful of white chrysanthemums. They had been in the church about half an hour, and then they had come out again, and Miss Stevens and the young lady had got into the brougham. The chrysanthemums had been for the decoration of the ballroom, as everybody knew. Then he had taken Miss Stevens to meet the last train for Ryde; and finally he had driven his young ladies home with a gentleman on the box that had got down at the gate, but whether he came any further or not Andrews did not know. The vicar had gone on in search of information to Steephill Church, and found that the old rector there, in the absence of the curate—he himself being almost past duty by reason of old age—had married one of the gentlemen living at the Castle to a young lady whose name he could not recollect further than that it was Stella. The old gentleman had thought it all right as it was a gentleman from the Castle, and he had a special licence, which made everything straight. The register of the marriage was all right in the books, as the vicar had taken care to see. Of course it was all right in the books! Katherine was much surprised that they should all make such a point of that, as if anything else was to be thought of. What did it matter about the register? The thing was that Stella had run away, that she was gone, that she had betrayed their trust in her, and been a traitor to her home.

But a girl is not generally judged very hardly when she runs away; it is supposed to be her parents' fault or her lover's fault, and she but little to blame. But when Katherine thought of her vigil on the cliff, her long watch in the moonlight, without a word of warning or farewell, she did not think that Stella was so innocent. Her heart was very sore and wounded by the desertion. The power of love indeed! Was there no love, then, but one? Did her home count for

nothing, where she had always been so cherished; nor her father, who had loved her so dearly; nor her sister, who had given up everything to her? Oh, no; perhaps the sister didn't matter! But at least her father, who could not bear that she should want anything upon which she had set her heart! Katherine's heart swelled at the thought of all Stella's contrivances to escape in safety. She had carried all her jewels with her, those jewels which she had partly acquired as the price of abandoning Sir Charles. Oh, the treachery, the treachery of it! She could scarcely keep her countenance while the gentlemen came with their reports. She felt her features distorted with the effort to show nothing but sorrow, and to thank them quietly for all the trouble they had taken. She would have liked to stamp her foot, to dash her clenched hands into the air, almost to utter those curses which had burst from her father. What a traitor she had been! What a traitor! She was glad to get the men out of the house, who were very kind, and wanted to do more if she would let them—to do anything, and especially to return and communicate to Mr. Tredgold the result of their inquiries when he woke from his long sleep. Katherine said No, no, she would prefer to tell him herself. There seemed to be but one thing she desired, and that was to be left alone.

After this hot fit there came, as was natural, a cold one. Katherine went upstairs to her own room, the room divided from that other only by an open door, which they had occupied ever since they were children. Then her loneliness came down upon her like a pall. Even with the thrill of this news in all her frame, she felt a foolish impulse to go and call Stella—to tell Stella all about it, and hear her hasty opinion. Stella never hesitated to give her opinion, to pronounce upon every subject that was set before her with rapid, unhesitating decisions. She would have known exactly what to say on this subject. She would have taken the girl's part; she would have asked what right a man had because he was your father to be such a tyrant. Katherine could hear the very tone in which she would have condemned the unnatural parent, and

see the indignant gesture with which she would have lifted her head. And now there was nobody, nothing but silence; the room so vacant, the trim bed so empty and cold and white. It was like a bed of death, and Katherine shivered. The creature so full of impulses and hasty thoughts and crude opinions and life and brightness would never be there again. No, even if papa would forgive—even if he would receive her back, there would be no Stella any more. This would not be her place; the sisterly companionship was broken, and life could never more be what it had been.

She sat down on the floor in the middle of the desolation and cried bitterly. What should she do without Stella? Stella had always been the first to think of everything; the suggestion of what to do or say had always been in her hands. Katherine did not deny to herself that she had often thought differently from Stella, that she had not always accepted either her suggestions or her opinions; but that was very different from the silence, the absence of that clear, distinct, self-assured little voice, the mind made up so instantaneously, so ready to pronounce upon every subject. Even in this way of looking at it, it will be seen that she was no blind admirer of her sister. She knew her faults as well as anyone. Faults! she was made up of faults—but she was Stella all the same.

She had cried all her tears out, and was still sitting intent, with her sorrowful face, motionless, in the reaction of excitement, upon the floor, when Simmons, the housekeeper, opened the door, and looked round for her, calling at last in subdued tones, and starting much to see the lowly position in which her young mistress was. Simmons came attended by the little jingle of a cup and spoon, which had been so familiar in the ears of the girls in all their little childish illnesses, when Simmons with the beef-tea or the arrowroot, or whatever it might be, was a change and a little amusement to them, in the dreadful vacancy of a day in bed. Mrs. Simmons, though she was a great personage in the house and (actually) ordered the dinners and ruled over everything, notwithstanding any fond illusions that Katherine might cherish on that subject, had never

delegated this care to anyone else, and Katherine knew very well what was going to be said.

"Miss Katherine, dear, sit up now and take this nice beef-tea. I've seen it made myself, and it's just as good as I know how. And you must take something if you're ever to get up your strength. Sit up, now, and eat it as long as it's nice and hot—do!" The address was at once persuasive, imploring, and authoritative. "Sit up, now, Miss Katherine—do!"

"Oh, Simmons, it isn't beef-tea I want this time," she said, stumbling hastily to her feet.

"No," Simmons allowed with a sigh, "but you want your strength kep' up, and there's nothing so strengthening. It'll warm you too. It's a very cold morning and there's no comfort in the house—not a fire burning as it ought to, not a bit of consolation nowhere. We can't all lay down and die, Miss Katherine, because Miss Stella, bless her, has married a very nice gentleman. He ain't to your papa's liking, more's the pity, and sorry I am in many ways, for a wedding in the house is a fine thing, and such a wedding as Miss Stella's, if she had only pleased your papa! It would have been a sight to see. But, dear, a young lady's fancy is not often the same as an old gentleman's, Miss Katherine. We must all own to that. They thinks of one thing and the young lady, bless her, she thinks of another. It's human nature. Miss Stella's pleased herself, she hasn't pleased Master. Well, we can't change it, Miss Katherine, dear; but she's very 'appy, I don't make a doubt of it, for I always did say as Sir Charles was a very taking man. Lord bless us, just to think of it! I am a-calling her Miss Stella, and it's my Lady she is, bless her little heart!"

Though she despised herself for it, this gave a new turn to Katherine's thoughts too. Lady Somers! yes, that was what Stella was now. That little title, though it was not an exalted one, would have an effect upon the general opinion, however lofty might be the theories expressed, as to the insignificance of rank. Rank; it was the lowest grade of anything that could be called rank. And yet it would have a certain

effect on the general mind. She was even conscious of feeling it herself, notwithstanding both the indignation and the sorrow in her mind. "My sister, Lady Somers!" Was it possible that she could say it with a certain pleasure, as if it explained more or less now (a question which had always been so difficult) who the Tredgolds were, and what they were worth in the island. Now Katherine suddenly realised that people would say, "One of the daughters married Sir Charles Somers." It would be acknowledged that in that case the Tredgolds might be people to know. Katherine's pride revolted, yet her judgment recognised the truth of it. And she wondered involuntarily if it would affect her father—if he would think of that?

"Is my father awake yet, Simmons?" she asked.

"Beginning to stir, Miss Katherine," Dolby said. "How clever they are, them doctors, with their sleeping draffs and things! Oh, I'm quite opposed to 'em. I don't think as it's right to force sleep or anything as is contrary to the Almighty's pleasure. But to be such nasty stuff, the effect it do have is wonderful. Your papa, as was so excited like and ready to shoot all of us, right and left, he has slep' like a baby all these hours. And waking up now, Dolby says, like a lamb, and ready for his breakfast."

"I must go to him at once, Simmons," cried Katherine, thrusting back into Simmons's hand the cup and the spoon.

"You won't do nothing of the sort, Miss, if so be as you'll be guided by me. He'll not think of it just at once, and he'll eat his breakfast, which will do him a lot of good, and if he don't see you, why, he'll never remember as anything's up. And then when he comes to think, Dolby will call you, Miss Katherine, if the doctor isn't here first, which would be the best way."

"I think I ought to go to him at once," Katherine said. But she did not do so. It was no pleasant task. His looks when he burst forth into these oaths and curses (though she had herself felt not very long ago as if to do the same might have been a relief to her surcharged and sickened soul), and

when he lay, with his keen small eyes gleaming red with passion, in his bed, looking at her, came back to her with a shudder. Perhaps she had not a very elevated ideal of a father. The name did not imply justice or even tenderness to her mind. Katherine was well aware that he had never done her justice all her life. He had been kind—enough; but his kindness had been very different from the love he had shown to Stella. He had elevated the younger sister over the elder since ever the children had known how to distinguish between good and evil. But still he was papa. It might be that an uneasy feeling that she was not proud of her father had visited the girl's mind more than once, when she saw him among other men; but still he was papa just as Stella was Stella, and therefore like no one else, whatever they might say or do. She did not like to go to him again, to renew his misery and her own, to hear him curse the girl whom he had adored, to see that dreadful look as if of a fiend in his face. Her own feelings had fallen into a sort of quietude now by means of exhaustion, and of the slow, slow moments, which felt every one of them as if it were an hour.

It was some time longer before she was called. Mr. Tredgold had got up; he had made his toilet, and gone down to his sitting-room, which communicated with his bedroom by a little private staircase. And it was only when he was there that his eyes fell on his clock, and he cried with a start:

"Half-past twelve, and I just come downstairs! What does this mean—what does it mean? Why wasn't I called at the right time?"

"You had a—a restless night, sir," said the man, trembling. ("Oh, where's that Miss Katherine, where's that young person," he said to himself.)

"A restless night! And why had I a restless night? No supper, eh? Never eat supper now. Girls won't let me. Hollo! I begin to remember. Wasn't there an alarm of burglars? And none of you heard, you deaf fools; nobody but me, an old man! I let go one barrel at them, eh? Enough to send them all flying. Great fun that. And then

Katherine, Katherine—what do I remember about Katherine? Stopped me before I could do anything, saying there was nobody. Fool, to mind what she said; quite sure there was somebody, eh? Can't you tell me what it was?"

"Don't know, indeed, sir," said the man, whose teeth were chattering with fear.

"Don't know, indeed! You ought to be ashamed of yourself. Speak out, you fool. Was it burglars——"

"No, sir. I think not, sir. I—don't know what it was, sir. Something about Miss——about Miss——"

"About whom?" the old man cried.

"Oh, sir, have a little patience—it's all right, it's all right, sir—just Miss Stella, sir, that—that is all right, sir—all safe, sir," the attendant cried.

Old Tredgold sat upright in his chair; he put his elbows on the table to support his head. "Miss Stella!" he said with a sudden hoarseness in his voice.

And then the man rushed out to summon Katherine, who came quietly but trembling to the call.

He uncovered his face as she came in. It was ghastly pale, the two gleaming points of the eyes glimmering out of it like the eyes of a wild beast. "Stella, Stella!" he said hoarsely, and, seizing Katherine by the arm, pressed her down upon a low chair close to him. "What's all this cock and a bull story?" he said.

"Oh, papa!"

He seized her again and shook her in his fury. "Speak out or I'll—I'll kill you," he said.

Her arm was crushed as in an iron vice. Body and soul she trembled before him. "Papa, let me go or I can say nothing! Let me go!"

He gave her arm one violent twist and then he dropped it. "What are you afraid of?" he said, with a gleam of those angry eyes. "Go on—go on—tell me what happened last night."

Katherine's narrative was confused and broken, and Mr. Tredgold was not usually a man of very clear intelligence. It

must have been that his recollections, sent into the background of his mind by the extreme shock of last night, and by the opiate which had helped him to shake it off, had all the time been working secretly within him through sleeping and waking, waiting only for the outer framework of the story now told him. He understood every word. He took it all up point by point, marking them by the beating of his hand upon the arm of his chair. "That's how it was," he said several times, nodding his head. He was much clearer about it than Katherine, who did not yet realise the sequence of events or that Stella was already Charlie Somers's wife when she came innocently back with her white flowers, and hung about her father at his luncheon, doing everything possible to please him; but he perceived all this without the hesitation of a moment and with apparent composure. "It was all over, then," he said to himself; "she had done it, then. She took us in finely, you and me, Kate. We are a silly lot—to believe what everyone tells us. She was married to a fine gentleman before she came in to us all smiling and pleasant;" and, then, speaking in the same even tone, he suddenly cursed her, without even a pause to distinguish the words.

"Papa, papa!" Katherine cried, almost with a shriek.

"What is it, you little fool? You think perhaps I'll say 'Bless you, my children,' and have them back? They think so themselves, I shouldn't wonder; they'll find out the difference. What about those diamonds that I gave her instead of him—instead of——" And here he laughed, and in the same steady tone bade God curse her again.

"I cannot hear you say that—I cannot, I cannot! Oh, God bless and take care of my poor Stella! Oh, papa, little Stella, that you have always been so fond of——"

Mr. Tredgold's arm started forth as if it would have given a blow. He dashed his fist in the air, then subsided again and laughed a low laugh. "I shan't pay for those diamonds," he said. "I'll send them back, I'll—— And her new clothes that she was to get—God damn her. She can't have taken her clothes, flying off from a ball by night."

"Oh, what are clothes, or money, or anything, in comparison with Stella!" Katherine said.

"Not much to you that don't have to pay for them," he said. "I shan't pay for them. Go and pack up the rags, don't you hear? and bring me the diamonds. She thinks we'll send 'em after her." And here the curse again. "She shan't have one of them, not one. Go and do what I tell you, Katie. God damn her and her——"

"Oh, papa, for the sake of everything that is good! Yes, I will go—I will go. What does it matter? Her poor little frocks, her——"

"They cost a deal of money all the same. And bring me the diamonds," Mr. Tredgold said.

And then there suddenly flashed upon Katherine a strange revelation, a ludicrous tragic detail which did not seem laughable to her, yet was so—— "The diamonds," she said faltering, half turning back on her way to the door.

"Well! the diamonds?"

"Oh, forgive her, forgive her! She never could have thought of that; she never could have meant it. Papa, for God's sake, forgive her, and don't say—*that* again. She was wearing them all at the ball. She was in her ball dress. She had no time to change—she——"

He seized and shook her savagely as if she had been confessing a theft of her own, and then rose up with his habitual chuckle in his throat. "George, she's done me," he said. "She's got her fortune on her back. She's—she's a chip of the old block, after all." He dropped down again heavily in his chair, and then with a calm voice, looking at Katherine, said tranquilly, "God damn her" once more.

CHAPTER XIX.

It was afterwards discovered that Stella had calculated her elopement in a way which justified most perfectly the unwilling applause elicited from her father—that she was a chip of the old block. She had over-decorated herself, as had been remarked, it now appeared, by everybody at the ball, on the night of her flight, wearing all the diamonds she had got from her father as an equivalent for her lover—and other things besides, everything she had that was valuable. It was ridiculous enough to see a girl blazing in all those diamonds; but to have her pearl necklace as well, adjusted as an ornament on her bodice, and bracelets enough to go up almost to the elbow, was more absurd still, and Katherine, it now appeared, was the only person who had not observed this excess of jewellery. She remembered now vaguely that she had felt Stella to be more radiant, more dazzling than ever, and had wondered with a sort of dull ache whether it was want of heart, whether it was over-excitement, or what it was which made her sister's appearance and aspect so brilliant on the very eve of her parting from her lover, "Partings which press the life from out young hearts." How was it possible that she could be so bright, so gay, so full of life, and be going away? She had felt this, but she had not noticed, which was strange, the extraordinary number of Stella's bracelets, or the manner in which her pearls were fastened upon the bosom of her dress. This was strange, but due chiefly perhaps to the fact that Stella had not shown herself, as usual, for her sister's admiration, but had appeared in a hurry rather late, and already wrapped in her cloak.

It was found, however, on examining her drawers, that Stella had taken everything she had which was of any value. It was

also discovered later that she had taken advantage of her father's permission to get as many new frocks as she pleased—always to make up for the loss of Charlie—by ordering for herself an ample *trousseau*, which had been sent to await her to a London hotel. She had all these things now and the lover too, which was so brilliant a practical joke that it kept the regiment in laughter for a year; but was not so regarded at home, though Mr. Tredgold himself was not able to refrain from a certain admiration when he became fully aware of it, as has been seen. It afflicted Katherine, however, with a dull, enduring pain in the midst of her longing for her sister and her sense of the dreadful vacancy made by Stella's absence. The cheerful calculation, the peaceful looks with which Stella had hid all her wiles and preparations gave her sister a pang, not acute but profound—a constant ache which took away all the spring of her life. Even when she tried to escape from it, making to herself all those *banal* excuses which are employed in such circumstances—about love, to which everything is permitted, and the lover's entreaties, to which nothing can be refused, and the fact that she had to live her own life, not another's, and was obeying the voice of Nature in choosing for herself—all these things, which Katherine presented to herself as consolations, were over and over again refused. If Stella had run away in her little white frock and garden hat, her sister could have forgiven her; but the *trousseau*, the maid, the diamonds, even the old pearls which had been given to both of them, and still remained the chief of Katherine's possessions—that Stella should have settled and arranged all that was more than Katherine could bear. She locked away her own pearls, with what she felt afterwards to be a very absurd sentiment, and vowed that she would never wear them again. There seemed a sort of insult in the addition of that girlish decoration to all her other ornaments. But this, the reader will perceive, was very high-flown on Katherine's part.

A day or two after this tremendous crisis, which, I need not say, was by far the most delightful public event which had occurred in Sliplin for centuries, and which moved the very

island to its centre, Lady Jane called with solemnity at the Cliff. Lady Jane was better dressed on this occasion than I believe she had ever been seen to be in the memory of men. She was attired in black brocade with a train, and wore such a mantle as everybody said must have been got for the occasion, since it was like nothing that had ever been seen on Lady Jane's shoulders before. The furs, too, were unknown to Siplia; perhaps she wore them in more favoured places, perhaps she had borrowed them for the occasion. The reason of all this display was beyond the divination of Katherine, who received her visitor half with the suppressed resentment which she felt she owed to everyone who could be supposed privy to Stella's plans, and half with the wistful longing for an old friend, a wiser and more experienced person, to console herself. Katherine had abandoned the young ladies' room, with all its double arrangements and suggestions of a life that was over. She sat in the large drawing-room, among the costly, crowded furniture, feeling as if, though less expensive, she was but one of them—a daughter needed, like the Italian cabinets, for the due furnishing of the house.

Lady Jane came in, feeling her way between the chairs and tables. It was appropriate that so formal a visit should be received in this formal place. She shook hands with Katherine, who held back visibly from the usual unnecessary kiss. It marked at once the difference, and that the younger woman felt herself elevated by her resentment, and was no longer to be supposed to be in any way at Lady Jane's feet.

"How do you do?" said Lady Jane, carrying out the same idea. "How is your father? I am glad to hear that he has, on the whole, not suffered in health—nor you either. Katherine, I hope?"

"I don't know about suffering in health. I am well enough," the girl said.

"I perceive," said Lady Jane, "by your manner that you identify me somehow with what has happened. That is why I have come here to-day. You must feel I don't come as I usually do. In ordinary circumstances I should probably have

sent for you to come to me. Katherine, I can see that you think I'm somehow to blame, in what way, I'm sure I don't know."

"I have never expressed any blame. I don't know that I have ever thought anyone was to blame—except——"

"Except—except themselves. You are right. They are very hot-headed, the one as much as the other. I don't mean to say that he—he is a sort of relation of mine—has not asked my advice. If he has done so once he has done it a hundred times, and I can assure you, Katherine, all that I have said has been consistently 'Don't ask me.' I have told him a hundred times that I would not take any responsibility. I have said to him, 'I can't tell how you will suit each other, or whether you will agree, or anything.' I have had nothing to do with it. I felt, as he was staying in my house at the time, that you or your father might be disposed to blame me. I assure you it would be very unjust. I knew no more of what was going on on Wednesday last—no more than—than Snap did," cried Lady Jane. Snap was the little tyrant of the fields at Steep-hill, a small fox terrier, and kept everything under his control.

"I can only say that you have never been blamed, Lady Jane. Papa has never mentioned your name, and as for me——"

"Yes, Katherine, you; it is chiefly you I think of. I am sure you have thought I had something to do with it."

Katherine made a pause. She was in a black dress. I can scarcely tell why—partly, perhaps, from some exaggerated sentiment—actually because Mrs. Simmons, who insisted on attending to her till someone could be got to replace Stevens, had laid it out. And she was unusually pale. She had not in reality "got over" the incident so well as people appeared to hope.

"To tell the truth," she said, "all the world has seemed quite insignificant to me except my sister. I have had so much to do thinking of her that I have had no time for anything else."

"That's not very complimentary to people that have taken so great an interest in you," Lady Jane was quite discomposed by having the word insignificant applied to her. She was certainly not insignificant, whatever else she might be.

"Perhaps it is not," Katherine said. "I have had a great deal to think of," she added with a half appeal for sympathy.

"I dare say. Is it possible that you never expected it? Didn't you see that night? All those jewels even might have told their story. I confess that I was vaguely in a great fright; but I thought you must have been in her confidence, Katherine, that is the truth."

"I in her confidence! Did you think I would have helped her to—to—deceive everybody—to—give such a blow to papa?"

"Is it such a blow to your papa? I am told he has not suffered in health. Now I look at you again you are pale, but I don't suppose you have suffered in health either. Katherine, don't you think you are overdoing it a little? She has done nothing that is so very criminal. And your own conduct was a little strange. You let her run off into the dark shrubberies to say farewell to him, as I am told, and never gave any alarm till you saw the yacht out in the bay, and must have known they were safe from any pursuit. I must say that a girl who has behaved like that is much more likely to have known all about it than an outsider like me!"

"I did not know anything about it," cried Katherine—"nothing! Stella did not confide in me. If she had done so—if she had told me——"

"Yes; what would you have done then?" Lady Jane asked with a certain air of triumph.

Katherine looked blankly at her. She was wandering about in worlds not realised. She had never asked herself that question. And yet perhaps her own conduct, her patience in that moonlight scene was more extraordinary in her ignorance than it would have been had she sympathised and known. The question took her breath away, and she had no answer to give.

"If she had told you that she had been married to Charlie Somers that morning ; that he was starting for India next day ; that whatever her duty to her father and yourself might have been (that's nonsense ; a girl has no duty to her sister), her duty to her husband came first then. If she had told you that at the last moment, Katherine, what would you have done?"

Katherine felt every possibility of reply taken from her. What could she have done? Supposing Stella that night—that night in the moonlight, which somehow seemed mixed up with everything—had whispered *that* in her ear, instead of the lie about wishing to bid Charlie farewell. What could she have done ; what would she have done? With a gasp in her throat she looked helplessly at her questioner. She had no answer to make.

"Then how could you blame me?" cried Lady Jane, throwing off her wonderful furs, loosening her mantle, beginning, with her dress tucked up a little in front, to look more like herself. "What was to be done when they had gone and taken it into their own hands? You can't separate husband and wife, though, Heaven knows, there are a great many that would be too thankful if you could. But there they were—married. What was to be done? I made sure when you would insist on driving home with her, Katherine, that she must have told you."

"I was not expected, then, to drive home with her?" Katherine said sharply. "It was intended that I should know nothing—nothing at all."

"I thought—I sincerely thought," said Lady Jane, hanging her head a little, "that she would have told you then. I suppose she was angry at the delay."

Katherine's heart was very sore. She had been the one who knew nothing, from whom everything had been kept. It had been intended that she should be left at the ball while Stella stole off with her bridegroom ; and her affectionate anxiety about Stella's headache had been a bore, the greatest bore, losing so much time and delaying the escape. And shut up there with her sister, her closest friend, her inseparable com-

panion of so many years, there had not been even a whisper of the great thing which had happened, which now stood between them and cut them apart for ever. Katherine, in her life of the secondary person, the always inferior, had learned unconsciously a great deal of self-repression; but it taxed all her powers to receive this blow full on her breast and make no sign. Her lips quivered a little; she clasped her hands tightly together; and a hot and heavy moisture, which made everything awry and changed, stood in her eyes.

"Was that how it was?" she said at last when she had controlled her voice to speak.

"Katherine, dear child, I can't tell you how sorry I am. Nobody thought that you would feel it——" Lady Jane added after a moment, "so much," and put out her hand to lay it on Katherine's tightly-clasped hands.

"Nobody thought of me, I imagine, at all," said Katherine, withdrawing from this touch, and recovering herself after that bitter and blinding moment. "It would have been foolish to expect anything else. And it is perhaps a good thing that I was not tried—that I was not confided in. I might perhaps have thought of my duty to my father. But a woman who is married," she added quickly, with an uncontrollable bitterness, "has, I suppose, no duties, except to the man whom—who has married her."

"He must always come first," said Lady Jane with a little solemnity. She was thunderstruck when Katherine, rising quickly to her feet and walking about the room, gave vent to Brabantio's exclamation before the Venetian senators;

"Look to her, thou: have a quick eye to see,
She hath deceived her father and may thee."

Lady Jane was not an ignorant woman for her rank and position. She had read the necessary books, and kept up a kind of speaking acquaintance with those of the day. But it may be excused to her, a woman of many occupations, if she did not remember whence this outburst came, and thought it exceed-

ingly ridiculous and indeed of very doubtful taste, if truth must be told.

"I could not have thought you would be so merciless," she said severely. "I thought you were a kind creature, almost too kind. It is easy to see that you have never been touched by any love-affair of your own."

Katherine laughed—there seemed no other reply to this assumption—and came back and sat down quietly in her chair.

"Was that all, Lady Jane?" she said. "You came to tell me you had nothing to do with the step my sister has taken, and then that you knew all about it, and that it was only I who was left out."

"You are a very strange girl, Katherine Tredgold. I excuse you because no doubt you have been much agitated, otherwise I should say you were very rude and impudent." Lady Jane was gathering on again her panoply of war—her magnificent town-mantle, the overwhelming furs which actually belonged to her maid. "I knew nothing about the first step," she said angrily. "I was as ignorant of the marriage as you were. Afterwards, I allow, they told me; and as there was nothing else to be done—for, of course, as you confess, a woman as soon as she is married has no such important duty as to her husband—I did not oppose the going away. I advised them to take you into their confidence; afterwards, I allow, for their sakes, I promised to keep you engaged, if possible, to see that you had plenty of partners and no time to think."

Katherine was ashamed afterwards to remember how the prick of injured pride stung her more deeply than even that of wounded affection. "So," she said, her cheeks glowing crimson, "it was to your artifice that I owed my partners! But I have never found it difficult to get partners—without your aid, Lady Jane!"

"You will take everything amiss, however one puts it," said Lady Jane. And then there was a long pause, during which that poor lady struggled much with her wraps without any help from Katherine, who sat like stone and saw her difficulties without lifting so much as a little finger. "You are to be

excused," the elder lady added, "for I do not think you have been very well treated, though, to be sure, poor Stella must have felt there was very little sympathy likely, or she certainly would have confided in you. As for Charlie Somers——" Lady Jane gave an expressive wave of her hand, as if consenting that nothing was to be expected from him; then she dropped her voice and asked with a change of tone, "I don't see why it should make any difference between you and me, Katherine. I have really had nothing to do with it—except at the very last. Tell me now, dear, how your father takes it? Is he very much displeased?"

"Displeased is a weak word, Lady Jane."

"Well, angry then—enraged—any word you like; of course, for the moment no word will be strong enough."

"I don't think," said Katherine, "that he will ever allow her to enter his house, or consent to see her again."

"Good Heavens!" cried Lady Jane. "Then what in the world is to become of them? But I am sure you exaggerate—in the heat of the moment; and, of course, Katherine, I acknowledge you have been very badly used," she said.

CHAPTER XX.

KATHERINE was perhaps not in very good condition after Lady Jane's visit, though that great personage found it, on the whole, satisfactory, and felt that she had settled the future terms on which they were to meet in quite a pleasant way—to receive the first letter which Stella sent her, an epistle which arrived a day or two later. Stella's epistle was very characteristic indeed. It was dated from Paris:

"Dearest Kate,—I can't suppose that you have not heard everything about all that we have done and haven't done. I don't excuse myself for not writing on the plea that you couldn't possibly be anxious about me, as you must have known all this by next morning, but I can't help feeling that you must have been angry, both you and papa, and I thought it would perhaps be better just to let you cool down. I know you have cause to be angry, dear; I ought to have told you, and it was on my lips all the time; but I thought you might think it your duty to make a row, and then all our plans might have been turned upside down. What we had planned to do was to get across to Southsea in the yacht, and go next morning by the first train to London, and on here at once, which, with little divergencies, we carried out. You see we have never been to say out of reach; but it would have done you no good to try to stop us, for, of course, from the moment I was Charlie's wife my place was with him. I know you never would have consented to such a marriage; but it is perfectly all right, I can assure you—as good as if it had come off in St. George's, Hanover Square. And we have had a delightful time. Stevens met me at Southsea with the few things I wanted (apologies for taking her from you, but you never

made so much use of her as I did, and I don't think you ever cared for Stevens), and next day we picked up our things at London. I wish you could see my things, they are beautiful. I hope papa won't be dreadfully angry that I took him at his word; and I am quite frightened sometimes to think what it will all cost—the most lovely *trousseau* all packed in such nice boxes—some marked cabin and some—but that's a trifle. The important thing is that the clothes are charming, just what you would expect from Madame's tastes. I do hope that papa will not make any fuss about her bill. They are not dear at all, for material and workmanship (can you say workmanship, when it's needlework, and all done by women?) are simply splendid. I never saw such beautiful things.

“ And so here I am, Kate, a married woman, off to India with my husband. Isn't it wonderful? I can't say that I feel much different myself. I am the same old Stella, always after my fun. I shouldn't wonder in the least if after a while Charlie were to set up a way of his own, and think he can stop me; but I don't advise him to try, and in the meantime he is as sweet as sugar and does exactly what I like. It is nice, on the whole, to be called my Lady, and it is very nice to see how respectful all the people are to a married person, as if one had grown quite a great personage all at once. And it is nicer still to turn a big man round your little finger, even when you have a sort of feeling, as I have sometimes, that it may not last. One wonderful thing is that he is always meeting somebody he knows. People in society I believe know everybody—that is, really everybody who ought to be known. This man was at school with him, and that man belongs to one of his clubs, and another was brother to a fellow in his regiment, and so on, and so on—so we need never be alone unless we like: they turn up at every corner. Of course, he knows the ladies too, but this is not a good time in the year for them, for the *grandees* are at their country houses and English people only passing through. We did see one gorgeous person, who was a friend of his mother's (who is dead, Heaven be praised!), and to whom he introduced me,

but she looked at me exactly as if she had heard that Charlie had married a barmaid, with a 'How do you do?' up in the air—an odious woman. She was, of course, Countess of Something or Other, and as poor as a Church mouse. Papa could buy up dozens of such countesses; tell him I said so.

"You will wonder what we are doing knocking about in Paris when the regiment is on the high seas; but Charlie could not take me, you know, in a troopship, it would have been out of the question, and we couldn't possibly have spent our honeymoon among all those men. So he got his leave and we are going by a P. and O. boat, which are the best, and which we pick up at Brindisi, or at Suez, or somewhere. I am looking forward to it immensely, and to India, which is full of amusement, everybody tells me. I intend to get all the fun I can for the next year, and then I hope, I do hope, dear Katie, that papa may send for us home.

"How is poor dear papa? You may think I am a little hypocrite, having given him such a shock, but I did really hope he would see some fun in it—he always had such a sense of humour. I have thought of this, really, truly, in all I have done. About the *trousseau* (which everybody thinks the greatest joke that ever was), and about going off in the yacht, and all that, I kept thinking that papa, though he would be very angry, would see the fun. I planned it all for that—indeed, indeed, Kate, I did, whatever you may think. To be sure, Charlie went for half in the planning, and I can't say I think he has very much sense of humour, but, still, that was in my mind all the time. Was he very, very angry when he found out? Did you wake him in the night to tell him and risk an illness? If you did, I think you were very, very much to blame. There is never any hurry in telling bad news. But you are so tremendously straightforward and all that. I hope he only heard in the morning, and had his good night's rest and was not disturbed. It was delicious this time in the yacht, as quiet almost as a mill-pond—just a nice soft little air that carried us across the bay and on to South-sea; such a delightful sail! I ought to have thought of you

promenading about in the cold waiting for me without any companion, but I really couldn't, dear. Naturally we were too much taken up with ourselves, and the joy of having got off so nicely. But I do beg your pardon most sincerely, dear Katie, for having left you out in the cold, really out in the cold—without any figure of speech—like that.

“But my thoughts keep going back constantly to dear papa. You will miss me a little, I hope, but not as he will miss me. What does he say? Was he very angry? Do you think he is beginning to come round? Oh, dear Kate, I hope you take an opportunity when you can to say something nice to him about me. Tell him Charlie wanted to be married in London, but I knew what papa would think on this subject, and simply insisted for his sake that it should be in the little Steephill Church, where he could go himself, if he liked, and see the register and make sure that it was all right. And I have always thought of him all through. You may say it doesn't look very like it, but I have, I have, Kate. I am quite sure that he will get very fond of Charlie after a time, and he will like to hear me called Lady Somers; and now that my mind is set at rest and no longer drawn this way and that way by love affairs, don't you know? I should be a better daughter to him than ever before. Do get him to see this, Kate. You will have all the influence now that I am away. It is you that will be able to turn him round your little finger. And, oh, I hope, I hope, dear, that you will do it, and be true to me! You have always been such a faithful, good sister, even when I tried you most with my nonsense. I am sure I tried you, you being so different a kind from such a little fool as Stella, and so much more valuable and all that. Be sure to write to me before we leave Paris, which will be in a week, to tell me how papa is, and how he is feeling about me—and, *oh*, do be faithful to us, dear Kate, and make him call us back within a year! Charlie does not mind about his profession; he would be quite willing to give it up and settle down, to be near papa. And then, you see, he has really a beautiful old house of his own in the country, which he never

could afford to live in, where we could arrange the most charming *appartement*, as the French say, for papa for part of the year.

"Do, dearest Kate, write, write! and tell me all about the state of affairs. With Charlie's love,

"Your most affectionate sister,

"STELLA (LADY) SOMERS."

"I have a letter from—Stella, papa," said Katherine the same night.

"Ah!" he said, with a momentary prick of his ears; then he composed himself and repeated with the profoundest composure, "God damn her!" as before.

"Oh, papa, do not say that! She is very anxious to know how you are, and to ask you—oh, with all her heart, papa—to forgive her."

Mr. Tredgold did not raise his head or show any interest. He only repeated with the same calm that phrase again.

"You have surely something else to say at the mention of her name than that. Oh, papa, she has done very, very wrong, but she is so sorry—she would like to fling herself at your feet."

"She had better not do that; I should kick her away like a football," he said.

"You could never be cruel to Stella—your little Stella! You always loved her the best of us two. I never came near her in one way nor another."

"That is true enough," said the old man.

Katherine did not expect any better, but this calm daunted her. Even Stella's absence did not advance her in any way; she still occupied the same place, whatever happened. It was with difficulty that she resumed her questions.

"And you will miss her dreadfully, papa. Only think, those long nights that are coming—how you will miss her with her songs and her chatter and her brightness! I am only a dull companion," said Katherine, perhaps a little, though not very reasonably, hoping to be contradicted.

"You are that," said her father calmly.

What was she to say? She felt crushed down by this disapproval, the calm recognition that she was nobody, and that all her efforts to be agreeable could never meet with any response. She did make many efforts, far more than ever Stella had done. Stella had never taken any trouble; her father's comfort had in reality been of very little importance to her. She had pleased him because she was Stella, just as Katherine, because she was Katherine, did not please him. And what was there more to be said? It is hard upon the unpleasing one, the one who never gives satisfaction, but the fact remains.

"You are very plain spoken," said Katherine, trying to find a little forlorn fun in the situation. "You don't take much pains to spare my feelings. Still, allowing that to be all true, and I don't doubt it for a moment, think how dull you will be in the evenings, papa! You will want Stella a hundred times in an hour, you will always want her. This winter, of course, they could not come back; but before another winter, oh, papa, think for your own advantage—do say that you will forgive her, and that they may come back!"

"We may all be dead and gone before another winter," Mr. Tredgold said.

"That is true; but then, on the other hand, we may all be living and very dull and in great, great need of something to cheer us up. Do hold out the hope, papa, that you will forgive her, and send for her, and have her back!"

"What is she to give you for standing up for her like this?" said the old man with his grim chuckling laugh.

"To give—me?" Katherine was so astonished this time that she could not think of any answer.

"Because you needn't lose your breath," said her father, "for you'll lose whatever she has promised you. I've only one word to say about her, and that I've said too often already to please you—God damn her," her father said.

And Katherine gave up the unequal conflict—for the moment at least. It was not astonishing, perhaps, that she spent

a great deal of her time, as much as the weather would allow, which now was grim November, bringing up fog from land and sea, upon the cliff, where she walked up and down sometimes when there was little visible except a grey expanse of mist behind the feathery tracery of the tamarisk trees; sometimes thinking of those two apparitions of the *Stella* in the bay, which now seemed to connect with each other like two succeeding events in a story, and sometimes of very different things. She began to think oftener than she had ever done of her own lover, he whom she had not had time to begin to love, only to have a curious half-awakened interest in, at the time when he was sent so summarily about his business. Had he not been sent about his business, probably Katherine might never have thought of him at all. It was the sudden fact of his dismissal and the strange discovery thus made, that there was one person in the world at least whose mind was occupied with her and not with *Stella*, that gave him that hold upon her mind which he had retained.

She wondered now vaguely what would have happened had she done what *Stella* had done? (It was impossible, because she had not thought of him much, had not come to any conscious appropriation of him until after he was gone; but supposing, for the sake of argument, that she had done what *Stella* had done). She would have been cut off, she and he, and nobody would have been much the worse. *Stella*, then, being the only girl of the house, would have been more serious, would have been obliged to think of things. She would have chosen someone better than *Charlie Somers*, someone that would have pleased her father better; and he would have kept his most beloved child, and all would have been well. From that point of view it would perhaps have been better that Katherine should have done evil that good might come. Was it doing evil to elope from home with the man you loved, because your father refused him—if you felt you could not live without him? That is a question very difficult to solve. In the first place, Katherine, never having been, let us say, very much in love herself, thought it was almost immodest

in a woman to say that she could not live without any man. It might be that she loved a man who did not love her, or who loved somebody else, and then she would be compelled, whatever she wished, to live without him. But, on the other hand, there was the well-worn yet very reasonable argument that it is the girl's life and happiness that is concerned, not the parents', and that to issue a ukase like an emperor, or a bull like a pope, that your child must give up the man who alone can make her happy is tyrannical and cruel. You are commanded to obey your parents, but there are limits to that command; a woman of, say, thirty for instance (which to Katherine, at twenty-three, was still a great age), could not be expected to obey like a child; a woman of twenty even was not like a little girl. A child has to do what it is told, whether it likes or not; but a woman—and when all her own life is in question?

Those were thoughts which Katherine pondered much as she walked up and down the path on the cliff. For some time she went out very little, fearing always to meet a new group of interested neighbours who should question her about Stella. She shrank from the demands, from the criticisms that were sometimes very plain, and sometimes veiled under pretences of interest or sympathy. She would not discuss her sister with anyone, or her father, or their arrangements or family disasters, and the consequence was that, during almost the whole of that winter she confined herself to the small but varied domain which was such a world of flowers in summer, and now, though the trees were bare, commanded all the sun that enlivens a wintry sky, and all the aspects of the sea, and all the wide expanse of the sky. There she walked about and asked herself a hundred questions. Perhaps it would have been better for all of them if she had run away with James Stanford. It would have cost her father nothing to part with her; he would have been more lenient with the daughter he did not care for. And Stella would have been more thoughtful, more judicious, if there had been nobody at home behind her to bear the responsibility of common life. And then, Katherine

wondered, with a gasp, as to the life that might have been hers had she been James Stanford's wife. She would have gone to India, too, but with no *trousseau*, no diamonds, no gay interval at Paris. She would have had only him, no more, to fill up her horizon and occupy her changed life. She thought of this with a little shiver, wondering—for, to be sure, she was not, so to speak, in love with him, but only interested in him—very curious if it had been possible to know more about him, to get to understand him. It was a singular characteristic in him that it was she whom he had cared for and not Stella. He was the first and only person who had done so—at least, the only man. Women, she was aware, often got on better with her than with her sister; but that did not surprise her, somehow, while the other did impress her deeply. Why should he have singled out her, Katherine, to fall in love with? It showed that he must be a particular kind of man, not like other people. This was the reason why Katherine had taken so much interest in him, thought so much of him all this time, not because she was in love with him. And it struck her with quite a curious impression, made up of some awe, some alarm, some pleasure, and a good deal of abashed amusement, to think that she might, like Stella, have eloped with him—might have been living with him as her sole companion for two or three years. She used to laugh to herself and hush up her line of thinking abruptly when she came to this point, and yet there was a curious attraction in it.

Soon, however, the old routine, although so much changed, came back, the usual visitors came to call, there were the usual little assemblages to luncheon, which was the form of entertainment Mr. Tredgold preferred; the old round of occupations began, the Stanley girls and the others flowed and circled about her in the afternoon, and, before she knew, Katherine was drawn again into the ordinary routine of life.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE company in the house on the cliff was, however, very considerably changed, though the visitors were not much lessened in number. It became, perhaps, more *bourgeois*, certainly more village, than it had been. Stella, a daring, audacious creature, with her beauty, which burst upon the spectators at the first glance, and her absence of all reserve, and her determination to be "in" everything that was amusing or agreeable, had made her way among her social betters as her quieter and more sensitive sister would never have done. Then the prestige which had attached to them because of their wealth and that character of heiress which attracts not only fortune-hunters who are less dangerous, but benevolent match-makers and the mothers and sisters of impecunious but charming young men, had been much dulled and sobered by the discovery that the old father, despised of everybody, was not so easily to be moved as was supposed. This was an astonishing and painful discovery, which Lady Jane, in herself perfectly disinterested and wanting nothing from old Tredgold, felt almost more than anyone. She had not entertained the least doubt that he would give in. She did not believe, indeed, that Stella and her husband would ever have been allowed to leave England at all. She had felt sure that old Tredgold's money would at once and for ever settle all questions about the necessity of going to India with the regiment for Charlie; that he would be able at once to rehabilitate his old house, and to set up his establishment, and to settle into that respectable country-gentleman life in which all a man's youthful peccadilloes are washed out and forgotten.

Mr. Tredgold's obstinacy was thus as great a blow to Lady Jane as if she herself had been impoverished by it. She felt

the ground cut from under her feet, and her confidence in human nature destroyed. If you cannot make sure of a vulgar old father's weakness for his favourite child whom he has spoiled outrageously all her life, of what can you make sure? Lady Jane was disappointed, wounded, mortified. She felt less sure of her own good sense and intuitions, which is a very humbling thing—not to speak of the depreciation in men's minds of her judgment which was likely to follow. Indeed, it did follow, and that at once, people in general being very sorry for poor Charlie Somers, who had been taken in so abominably, and who never would have risked the expenses of married life, and a wife trained up to every extravagance, if he had not felt sure of being indemnified; and, what was still worse, they all agreed he never would have taken such a strong step—for he was a cautious man, was Charlie, notwithstanding his past prodigalities—if he had not been so pushed forward and kept up to the mark by Lady Jane.

The thing that Lady Jane really fell back on as a consolation in the pressure of these painful circumstances was that she had not allowed Algy to make himself ridiculous by any decisive step in respect to the "little prim one," as he called Katherine. This Lady Jane had sternly put down her foot upon. She had said at once that Katherine was not the favourite, that nothing could be known as to how the old man would leave her, along with many other arguments which intimidated the young one. As a matter of fact, Lady Jane, naturally a very courageous woman, was afraid of Algy's mother, and did not venture to commit herself in any way that would have brought her into conflict with Lady Scott, which, rather than any wisdom on her part, was the chief reason which had prevented additional trouble on that score. Poor Charlie Somers had no mother nor any female relation of importance to defend him. Lady Jane herself ought to have been his defence, and it was she who had led him astray. It was not brought against her open-mouthed, or to her face. But she felt that it was in everybody's mind, and that her reputation, or at least her prestige, had suffered.

This it was that made her drop the Tredgolds "like a hot potato." She who had taken such an interest in the girls, and superintended Stella's *début* as if she had been a girl of her own, retreated from Katherine as if from the plague. After the way they had behaved to poor dear Charlie Somers and his wife, she said, she could have no more to do with them. Lady Jane had been their great patroness, their only effectual connection with the county and its grandeurs, so that the higher society of the island was cast off at once from Katherine. I do not think she felt it very much, or was even conscious for a long time that she had lost anything. But still it was painful and surprising to her to be dismissed with a brief nod, and "How d'ye do?" in passing, from Lady Jane. She was troubled to think what she could have done to alienate a woman whom she had always liked, and who had professed, as Katherine knew, to think the elder sister the superior of the younger. That, however, was of course a mere *façon de parler*, for Stella had always been, Katherine reminded herself, the attraction to the house. People might even approve of herself more, but it was Stella who was the attraction—Stella who shocked and disturbed, and amused and delighted everybody about; who was always inventing new things, festive surprises and novelties, and keeping a whirl of life in the place. The neighbours gave their serious approval to Katherine, but she did not amuse them or surprise. They never had to speculate what she would do next. They knew (she said to herself) that she would always do just the conventional proper thing, whereas Stella never could be calculated upon, and had a perpetual charm of novelty. Katherine was not sufficiently enlightened to be aware that Stella's way in its wildness was much the more conventional of the two.

But the effect was soon made very plain. The link between the Tredgolds and the higher society of the island was broken. Perhaps it is conventional, too, to call these good people the higher society, for they were not high society in any sense of the word. There were a great many stupid people among them. Those who were not stupid were little elevated above

the other classes except by having more beautiful manners *when they chose*. Generally, they did not choose, and therefore were worse than the humble people because they knew better. Their one great quality was that they were the higher class. It is a great thing to stand first, whatever nation or tribe, or tongue, or sect, or station you may belong to. It is in itself an education: it saves even very stupid people from many mistakes that even clever people make in other spheres, and it gives a sort of habit of greatness—if I may use the words—of feeling that there is nothing extraordinary in brushing shoulders with the greatest at any moment: indeed, that it is certain you will brush shoulders with them, to-day or to-morrow, in the natural course of events. To know the people who move the world makes even the smallest man a little bigger, makes him accustomed to the stature of the gods.

I am not sure that this tells in respect to the poets and painters and so forth, who are what the youthful imagination always fixes on as the flower of noble society. One thinks in maturer life that perhaps one prefers not to come too close quarters with these, any more than with dignified clergymen, lest some of the bloom of one's veneration might be rubbed off. But one does not venerate in the same way the governors of the world, the men who are already historical; and it is perhaps they and their contemporaries from beyond all the seas, who, naturally revolving in that sphere, give a kind of bigness, not to be found in other spheres, to the highest class of society everywhere. One must account to oneself somehow for the universal pre-eminence of an aristocracy which consists of an enormous number of the most completely commonplace, and even vulgar, individuals. It is not high, but it cannot help coming in contact with the highest. Figures pass familiarly before its eyes, and brush its shoulders in passing, which are wonders and prodigies to other men. One wants an explanation, and this is the one that commends itself to me. Therefore, to be cut off from this higher class is an evil, whatever anyone may say.

Katherine, in her wounded pride and in her youth, did not

allow that she thought so, I need not say. Her serious little head was tossed in indignation as scornfully as Stella's would have been. She recalled to herself what dull people they were (which was quite true), and how commonplace their talk, and asked heaven and earth why she should care. Lottie Seton, for instance, with her retinue of silly young men: was she a loss to anyone? It was different with Lady Jane, who was a person of sense, and Katherine felt herself obliged to allow, different someway—she could not tell how—from the village ladies. Yet Lady Jane, though she disapproved highly of Mrs. Seton, for instance, never would have shut her out, as she very calmly and without the least hesitation shut out Katherine, of whom in her heart she did approve. It seemed to the girl merely injustice, the tyranny of a preposterous convention, the innate snobbishness (what other word is there?) of people in what is called society. And though she said little, she felt herself dropped out of that outer ledge of it, upon which Lady Jane's patronage had posed her and her sister, with an angry pang. Stella belonged to it now, because she had married a pauper, a mercenary, fortune-hunting, and disreputable man; but she, who had done no harm, who was exactly the same Katherine as ever, was dropped.

There were other consequences of this which were more harmful still. People who were connected in business with Mr. Tredgold, who had always appeared occasionally in the house, but against whom Stella had set her little impertinent face, now appeared in greater numbers, and with greater assurance than ever; and Mr. Tredgold, no longer held under subjection by Stella, liked to have them. With the hold she had on the great people, Stella had been able to keep these others at a distance, for Stella had that supreme distinction which belongs to aristocracy of being perfectly indifferent whether she hurt other people's feelings or not; but Katherine possessed neither the one advantage nor the other—neither the hold upon society nor the calm and indifference. And the consequence naturally was that she was pushed to the wall. The city people came more and more; and she had to be kind to them, to receive

them as if she liked it. When I say she had to do it, I do not mean that Katherine was forced by her father, but that she was forced by herself. There is an Eastern proverb that says "A man can act only according to his nature." It was no more possible for Katherine to be uncivil, to make anyone feel that he or she was unwelcome, to "hurt their feelings," as she would have said, than to read Hebrew or Chinese.

So she was compelled to be agreeable to the dreadful old men who sat and talked stocks and premiums, and made still more dreadful jokes with her father, making him chuckle till he almost choked; and to the old women who criticised her housekeeping, and told her that a little bit of onion (or something else) would improve this dish, or just a taste of brandy that, and who wondered that she did not control the table in the servants' hall, and give them out daily what was wanted. Still more terrible were the sons and daughters who came, now one, now another; the first making incipient love to her, the other asking about the officers, and if there were many balls, and men enough, or always too many ladies, as was so often the case. The worst part of her new life was these visits upon which she now exercised no control. Stella had done so. Stella had said, "Now, papa, I cannot have those old guys of yours here; let the men come from Saturday to Monday and talk shop with you if you like, but we can't have the women, nor the young ones. There I set down my foot," and this she had emphasised with a stamp on the carpet, which was sancy and pretty, and delighted the old man. But Mr. Tredgold was no fool, and he knew very well the difference between his daughters. He knew that Katherine would not put down her foot, and if she had attempted to do so, he would have laughed in her face—not a delighted laugh of acquiescence as with Stella, but a laugh of ridicule that she could suppose he would be taken in so easily. Katherine tried quietly to express to her father her hope that he would not inflict these guests upon her. "You have brought us up so differently, papa," she would say with hesitation, while he replied, "Stuff and nonsense! they are just as good as you are."

"Perhaps," said Katherine. "Mrs. Simmons, I am sure, is a much better woman than I am; but we don't ask her to come in to dinner."

"Hold your impudence!" her father cried, who was never choice in his expressions. "Do you put my friends on a level with your servants?" He would not have called them her servants in any other conversation, but in this it seemed to point the moral better.

"They are not so well bred, papa," she said, which was a speech which from Stella would have delighted the old man, but from Katherine it made him angry.

"Don't let me hear you set up such a——d pretensions," he cried. "Who ate you, I wonder, to turn up your nose at the Turnys of Lothbury? There is not a better firm in London, and young Turny's got his grandfather's money, and many a one of your grand ladies would jump at him. If you don't take your chance when you find it, you may never have another, my fine lady. None of your beggars with titles for me. My old friends before all."

This was a fine sentiment indeed, calculated to penetrate the most callous heart; but it made Katherine glow all over, and then grow chill and pale. She divined what was intended—that there were designs to unite her, now the representative of the Tredgolds, with the heir of the house of Turny. There was no discrepancy of fortune there. Old Turny could table thousand by thousand with Mr. Tredgold, and it was a match that would delight both parties. Why should Katherine have felt so violent a pang of offended pride? Mr. Turny was no better and no worse in origin than she. The father of that family was her father's oldest friend; the young people had been brought up with "every advantage"—even a year or two of the University for the eldest son, who, however, when he was found to be spending his time in vanities with other young men like himself—not with the sons of dukes and earls, which might have made it bearable—was promptly withdrawn accordingly, but still could call himself an Oxford man. The girls had been to school in France and in Germany, and had

learned their music in Berlin and their drawing in Paris. They were far better educated than Katherine, who had never had any instructor but a humble governess at home. How, then, did it come about that the idea of young Turny having the insolence to think of her should have made Katherine first red with indignation, then pale with disgust? I cannot explain it, neither could she to herself; but so it was. We used to hear a great deal about nature's noblemen in the days of sentimental fiction. But there certainly is such a thing as a natural-born aristocrat, without any foundation for his or her instinct, yet possessing it as potently as the most highly descended princess that ever breathed. Katherine's grandfather, as has been said, had been a respectable linen-draper, while the Turnys sprung from a house of business devoting itself to the sale of crockery at an adjoining corner; yet Katherine felt herself as much insulted by the suggestion of young Turny as a suitor as if she had been a lady of high degree and he a low-born squire. There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in our philosophy.

Two or three of such suitors crossed her path within a short time. Neither of the sisters might have deserved the attentions of these gentlemen had they been likely to share their father's wealth; but now that the disgrace of one was generally known, and the promotion of the other as sole heiress generally counted upon, this was what happened to Katherine. She was exceedingly civil in a superior kind of way, with an *air noble* that indeed sat very well upon her, and a dignity worthy of a countess at least to these visitors: serious and stately with the mothers, tolerant with the fathers, gracious with the daughters, but altogether unbending with the sons. She would have none of them. Two other famous young heroes of the city (both of whom afterwards married ladies of distinguished families; and who has not heard of Lady Arabella Turny?) followed the first, but with the same result. Mr. Tredgold was very angry with his only remaining child. He asked her if she meant to be an infernal fool too. If so,

she might die in a ditch for anything her father cared, and he would leave all his money to a hospital.

"A good thing too. Far better than heaping all your good money, that you've worked and slaved for, on the head of a silly girl. Who are you, I wonder," he said, "to turn up your dashed little nose? Why, you're not even a beauty like the other; a little prim thing that would never get a man to look twice at you but for your father's money at your back. But don't you make too sure of your father's money — to keep up your grandeur," he cried. Nevertheless, though he was so angry, Mr. Tredgold was rather pleased all the same to see his girl turn up her nose at his friends' sons. She was not a bit better than they were—perhaps not so good. And he was very angry, yet could not but feel flattered too at the hang-dog looks with which the Turnys and others went away—"tail between their legs," he said to himself; and it tickled his fancy and pride, though he was so much displeased.

CHAPTER XXII.

PERHAPS the village society into which Katherine was now thrown was not much more elevating than the Turnys, &c. ; but it was different. She had known it all her life, for one thing, and understood every allusion, and had almost what might be called an interest in all the doings of the parish. The fact that the old Cantrells had grown so rich that they now felt justified in confessing it, and were going to retire from the bakery and set up as private gentlefolks while their daughter and son-in-law entered into possession of the business, quite entertained her for half an hour while it was being discussed by Miss Mildmay and Mrs. Shanks over their tea. Katherine had constructed for herself in the big and crowded drawing-room, by means of screens, a corner in which there was both a fireplace and a window, and which looked like an inner room, now that she had taken possession of it. She had covered the gilded furniture with chintzes, and the shining tables with embroidered cloths. The fire always burned bright, and the window looked out over the cliff and the fringe of tamarisks upon the sea. The dual chamber, the young ladies' room, with all its contrivances for pleasure and occupation, was shut up, as has been said, and this was the first place which Katherine had ever had of her very own.

She did not work nearly so much for bazaars as she had done in the old Stella days. Then that kind of material occupation (though the things produced were neither very admirable in themselves nor of particular use to anyone) gave a sort of steady thread, flimsy as it was, to run through her light and airy life. It meant something if not much. *Elle fait ses robes*—which is the last height of the good girl's excellence in modern

French—would have been absurd ; and to make coats and cloaks for the poor by Stella's side would have been extremely inappropriate, not to say that such serious labours are much against the exquisite disorder of a modern drawing-room, therefore the bazaar articles had to do. But now there was no occasion for the bazaars—green and gilt paper stained her fingers no more. She had no one to keep in balance ; no one but herself, who weighed a little if anything to the other side, and required, if anything, a touch of frivolity, which, to be sure, the bazaars were quite capable of furnishing if you took them in that way. She read a great deal in this retreat of hers ; but I fear to say it was chiefly novels she read. And she had not the least taste for metaphysics. And anything about Woman, with a capital letter, daunted her at once. She was very dull sometimes—what human creature is not?—but did not blame anyone else for it, nor even fate. She chiefly thought it was her own fault, and that she had indeed no right to be dull ; and in this I think she showed herself to be a very reasonable creature.

Now that Lady Jane's large landau never swept up to the doors, one of the most frequent appearances there was that convenient but unbeautiful equipage called the midge. It was not a vehicle beloved of the neighbourhood. The gardener's wife, now happily quite recovered from the severe gunshot wound she had received on the night of Stella's elopement, went out most reluctantly, taking a very long time about it, to open the gate when it appeared. She wanted to know what was the good of driving that thing in, as was no credit to be seen anywhere, when them as used it might just as well have got out outside the gate and walked. The ladies did not think so at all. They were very particular to be driven exactly up to the door and turned half round so that the door which was at the end, not the side of the vehicle, should be opposite the porch ; and they would sometimes keep it waiting an hour, a remarkable object seen from all the windows, while they sat with poor Katherine and cheered her up. These colloquies always began with inquiries after her sister.

"Have you heard again from Stella? Where is she now, poor child? Have you heard of their safe arrival? And where is the regiment to be quartered? And what does she say of the climate? Does she think it will agree with her? Are they in the plains, where it is so hot, or near the hills, where there is always a little more air?"

Such was the beginning in every case, and then the two ladies would draw their chairs a little nearer, and ask eagerly in half-whispers, "And your papa, Katherine? Does he show any signs of relenting? Does he ever speak of her? Don't you think he will soon give in? He must give in soon. Considering how fond he was of Stella, I cannot understand how he has held out so long."

Katherine ignored as much as she could the latter questions.

"I believe they are in quite a healthy place," she said, "and it amuses Stella very much, and the life is all so new. You know she is very fond of novelty, and there are a great many parties and gaieties, and of course she knows everybody. She seems to be getting on very well."

"And very happy with her husband, I hope, my dear—for that is the great thing after all."

"Do you expect Stella to say that she is not happy with her husband, Jane Shanks? or Katherine to repeat it if she did? All young women are happy with their husbands—that's taken for granted—so far as the world is concerned."

"I think, Ruth Mildmay, it is you who should have been Mrs. Shanks," cried the other, with a laugh.

"Heaven forbid! You may be quite sure that had I ever been tempted that way, I should only have changed for a better, not a worse name."

"Stella," cried Katherine to stop the fray, "seems to get on capitally with Charlie. She is always talking of him. I should think they were constantly together, and enjoying themselves very much indeed."

"Ah, it is early days," Miss Mildmay said, with a shake of her head. "And India is a very dissipated place. There are always things going on at an Indian station that keep people

from thinking. By-and-by, when difficulties come—— But you must always stand her friend and keep her before your father's eyes. I don't know if Jane Shanks has told you—but the news is all over the town—the Cantrells have taken that place, you know, with the nice paddock and garden; the place the doctor was after—quite a gentleman's little place. I forget the name, but it is near the Rectory—don't you know?—a little to the right; quite a gentleman's house."

"I suppose Mr. Cantrell considers himself a gentleman now," Katherine said, glad of the change of subject.

"Why, he's a magistrate," said Mrs. Shanks, "and could buy up the half of us—isn't that the right thing to say when a man has grown rich in trade?"

"It is a thing papa says constantly," said Katherine; "and I suppose, as that is what has happened to himself——"

"O my dear Katherine! you don't suppose that for one moment! fancy dear Mr. Tredgold, with his colossal fortune—a merchant prince and all that—compared to old Cantrell, the baker! Nobody could ever think of making such a comparison!"

"It just shows how silly it is not to make up your mind," said Miss Mildmay. "I know the doctor was after that house—much too large a house for an unmarried man, I have always said, but it was not likely that he would think anything of what I said—and now it is taken from under his very nose. The Cantrells did not take long to make up their minds! They go out and in all day long smiling at each other. I believe they think they will quite be county people with that house."

"It is nice to see them smiling at each other—at their age they were just as likely to be spitting fire at each other. I shall call certainly and ask her to show me over the house. I like to see such people's houses, and their funny arrangements and imitations, and yet the original showing through all the same."

"And does George Cantrell get the shop?" Katherine asked. She had known George Cantrell all her life—better

than she knew the young gentlemen who were to be met at Steephill and in whom it would have been natural to be interested. "He was always very nice to us when we were little," she said.

"Oh, my dear child, you must not speak of George Cantrell. He has gone away somewhere—nobody knows where. He fell in love with his mother's maid-of-all-work—don't you know?—and married her and put the house of Cantrell to shame. So there are no shops nor goodwills for George. He has to work as what they call a journeyman, after driving about in his nice cart almost like a gentleman."

"I suppose," said Miss Mildmay, "that even in the lower classes grades must tell. There are grades everywhere. When I gave the poor children a tea at Christmas, the carpenter's little girls were not allowed to come because the little flower-woman's children were to be there."

"For that matter we don't know anything about the doctor's grade, Ruth Mildmay. He might be a baker's son just like George for anything we know."

"That is true," said the other. "You can't tell who anybody is nowadays. But because he is a doctor—which I don't think anything of as a profession—none of my belongings were ever doctors, I know nothing about them—he might ask any girl to marry him—anybody——"

"Surely, his education makes some difference," Katherine said.

"Oh, education! You can pick up as much education as you like at any roadside now. And what does that kind of education do for you?—walking hospitals where the worst kind of people are collected together, and growing familiar with the nastiest things and the most horrible! Will that teach a man the manners of a gentleman?" Miss Mildmay asked, raising her hands and appealing to earth and heaven.

At this point in the conversation the drawing-room door opened, and someone came in knocking against the angles of the furniture.

"May I announce myself?" a voice said. "Burnet—"

Dr., as I stand in the directory. John was trying to catch the midge, which had bolted, and accordingly I brought myself in. How do you do, Miss Katherine? It is very cold outside."

"The midge bolted!" both the ladies cried with alarm, rushing to the window.

"Nothing of the sort," cried Mrs. Shanks, who was the more nimble. "It is there standing as quiet as a judge. Fancy the midge bolting!"

"Oh, have they got it safe again?" he said. "But you ladies should not drive such a spirited horse."

"Fancy——" Mrs. Shanks began, but the ground was cut from under her feet by her more energetic friend.

"Katherine," she said, "you see what a very good example this is of what we were saying. It is evident the doctor wants us to bolt after the midge—if you will forgive me using such a word."

"On the contrary," said the doctor, "I wish you to give me your advice, which I am sure nobody could do better. I want you to tell me whether you think the Laurels would be a good place for me to set up my household gods."

"The Laurels! oh, the Laurels——" cried Mrs. Shanks, eager to speak, but anxious at the same time to spare Dr. Burnet's feelings.

"The Cantrells have bought the Laurels," said Miss Mildmay, quickly, determined to be first.

"The Cantrells—the bakers!" he cried, his countenance falling.

"Yes, indeed, the Cantrells, the bakers—people who know their own mind, Dr. Burnet. They went over the house yesterday, every corner, from the drawing-room to the dustbin; and they were delighted with it, and they settled everything this morning. They are going to set up a carriage, and, in short, to become county people—if they can," Miss Mildmay said.

"They are very respectable," said Mrs. Shanks. "Of course, Ruth Mildmay is only laughing when she speaks of

county people—but I should like to ask her, after she has got into it, to show me the house."

"The Cantrells—the bakers!" cried Dr. Burnet, with a despair which was half grotesque, "in *my* house! This is a very dreadful thing for me, Miss Katherine, though I see that you are disposed to laugh. I have been thinking of it for some time as my house. I have been settling all the rooms, where this was to be and where that was to be." Here he paused a moment, and gave her a look which was startling, but which Katherine, notwithstanding her experience with the Turnys, etc., did not immediately understand. And then he grew a little red under his somewhat sunburnt weather-beaten complexion, and cried—"What am I to do? It unsettles everything. The Cantrells! in my house."

"You see, it doesn't do to shilly-shally, doctor," said Miss Mildmay. "You should come to the point. While you think about it someone else is sure to come in and do it. And the Cantrells are people that know their own minds."

"Yes, indeed," he said—"yes, indeed," shaking his head. "Poor George—they know their own minds with a vengeance. That poor fellow now is very likely to go to the dogs."

"No; he will go to London," said the other old lady. "I know some such nice people there in the same trade, and I have recommended him to them. You know the people, Katherine—they used to send us down such nice French loaves by the parcel post, that time when I quarrelled with the old Cantrells, don't you remember, about——"

"I don't think there is any other house about Sliplin that will suit you now, Dr. Burnet," said Miss Mildmay. "You will have to wait a little, and keep on the look-out."

"I suppose so," he said dejectedly, thrusting his hands down to the depths of his pockets, as if it were possible that he should find some consolation there.

And he saw the two ladies out with great civility, putting them into the midge with a care for their comfort which melted their hearts.

"I should wait a little now, if I were you," said Miss Mildmay, gripping his hand for a moment with the thin old fingers, which she had muffled up in coarse woollen gloves drawn on over the visiting kid. "I should wait a little, since you have let this chance slip."

"Do you think so?" he said.

"Ruth Mildmay," said Mrs. Shanks, when they had driven away. "This is not treating me fairly. There is something private between you and that young man which you have never disclosed to me."

"There is nothing private," said Miss Mildmay. "Do you think I'm an improper person, Jane Shanks? There is nothing except that I've got a pair of eyes in my head."

Dr. Burnet went slowly back to the drawing-room, where Katherine had promised him a cup of tea. His step sounded differently, and when he knocked against the furniture the sound was dull. He looked a different man altogether. He had come in so briskly, half an hour before, that Katherine was troubled for him.

"I am afraid you are very much disappointed about the house," she said.

"Yes, Miss Katherine, I am. I had set my heart on it somehow—and on other things connected with it," he said.

She was called Miss Katherine by everybody in consequence of the dislike of her father to have any sign of superiority over her sister shown to his eldest daughter. Miss Katherine and Miss Stella meant strict equality. Neither of them was ever called Miss Tredgold.

"I am very sorry," she said, with her soft sympathetic voice.

He looked at her, and she for a moment at him, as she gave him his cup of tea. Again she was startled, almost confused, by his look, but could not make out to herself the reason why. Then she made a little effort to recover herself, and said, with a half laugh, half shiver, "You are thinking how we once took tea together in the middle of the night."

"On that dreadful morning?" he said. "No, I don't

know that I was, but I shall never forget it. Don't let me bring it back to your mind."

"Oh, it doesn't matter. I think of it often enough. And I don't believe I ever thanked you, Dr. Burnet, for all you did for me, leaving everything to go over to Portsmouth, you that are always so busy, to make those inquiries—which were of so little good—and explaining everything to the Rector, and sending him off too."

"And his inquiries were of some use, though mine were not," he said. "Well, we are both your very humble servants, Miss Katherine; I will say that for him. If Stanley could keep the wind from blowing upon you too roughly he would do so, and it's the same with me."

Katherine looked up with a sudden open-eyed glance of pleasure and gratitude. "How very good of you to say that!" she cried. "How kind, how beautiful, to think it! It is true I am very solitary now. I haven't many people to feel for me. I shall always be grateful and happy to think that you have so kind a feeling for me, you two good men."

"Oh, as for the goodness," he said. And then he remembered Miss Mildmay's advice, and rubbed his hands over his eyes as if to take something out of them which he feared was there. Katherine sat down and looked at him very kindly, but her recollection was chiefly of the strong white teeth with which he had eaten the bread-and-butter in the dark of the winter morning after *that* night. It was the only breakfast he was likely to have, going off as he did on her concerns, and he had been called out of his bed in the middle of the night, and had passed a long time by her father's bedside. All these things made the simple impromptu meal very necessary; but still she had kept the impression on her mind of his strong teeth taking a large bite of the bread-and-butter, which was neither sentimental nor romantic. This was about all that passed between them on that day.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE village society in Sliplin was not to be despised, especially by a girl who had no pretensions, like Katherine. When a person out of the larger world comes into such a local society, it is inevitable that he or she should look upon it with a more or less courteous contempt, and that the chief members should condole with him or her upon the inferiority of the new surroundings, and the absence of those intellectual and other advantages which he or she is supposed to have tasted in London, for example. But, as a matter of fact, the intellectual advantages are much more in evidence on the lower than on the higher ground. Lady Jane, no doubt, had her own particular box from Mudie's and command of all the magazines, &c., at first hand; but then she read very little, having the Mudie books chiefly for her governess, and glancing only at some topic of the day, some great lady's predilections on Society and its depravity, or some fad which happened to be on the surface for the moment, and which everybody was expected to be able to discuss. Whereas the Sliplin ladies read all the books, vying with each other who should get them first, and were great in the *Nineteenth Century* and the *Fortnightly*, and all the more weighty periodicals. They were members of mutual improvement societies, and of correspondence classes, and I don't know all what. Some of them studied logic and other appalling subjects through the latter means, and many of them wrote modest little essays and chronicles of their reading for the press. When the University Extension Lectures were set up quite a commotion was made in the little town. Mr. Stanley, the rector, and Dr. Burnet were both on the committee, and everybody went to hear the lectures. They were

one year on the History of the Merovingians, and another year on Crockery—I mean Pottery, or rather Ceramic Art—and a third upon the Arctic Circle. They were thus calculated to produce a broad general intelligence, people said, though it was more difficult to see how they extended the system of the Universities, which seldom devote themselves to such varied studies. But they were very popular, especially those which were illustrated by the limelight.

All the ladies in Sliplin who had any respect for themselves attended these lectures, and a number read up the subjects privately, and wrote essays, the best of which were in their turn read out at subsequent meetings for the edification of the others. I think, however, these essays were rarely appreciated except by the families of the writers. But it may be easily perceived that a great deal of mental activity was going on where all this occurred.

The men of the community took a great deal less trouble in the improvement of their minds—two or three of them came to the lectures, a rather shame-faced minority amid the ranks of the ladies, but not one, so far as I have heard, belonged to a mutual improvement society, or profited by a correspondence class, or joined a Reading Union. Whether this was because they were originally better educated, or naturally had less intellectual enthusiasm, I cannot tell. In other places it might have been supposed to be because they had less leisure; but that was scarcely to be asserted in Sliplin, where nobody, or hardly anybody, had anything to do. There was a good club, and very good billiard tables, which perhaps supplied an alternative; but I would not willingly say anything to the prejudice of the gentlemen, who were really, in a general way, as intelligent as the ladies, though they did so much less for the improvement of their minds. Now, the people whom Katherine Tredgold had met at Steephill did none of these things—the officers and their society as represented by Charlie Somers and Algy Scott, and their original leader, Mrs. Seton, were, it is needless to state, absolutely innocent of any such efforts. Therefore Katherine, as may be said, had gained

rather than lost by being so much more drawn into this intellectually active circle when dropped by that of Lady Jane.

The chief male personages in this society were certainly the doctor and the clergyman. Curates came and curates went, and some of them were clever and some the reverse; but Mr. Stanley and Dr. Burnet went on for ever. They were of course invariably of all the dinner parties, but there the level of intelligence was not so high—the other gentlemen in the town and the less important ones in the country coming in as a more important element. But in the evening parties, which were popular in Sliplin during the winter, and the afternoon-tea parties which some people, who did not care to go out at night, tried hard to introduce in their place, they were supreme. It was astonishing how the doctor, so hard-worked a man, managed to find scraps of time for so many of these assemblages. He was never there during the whole of these symposia. He came very late or he went away very early, he put in half an hour between two rounds, or he ran in for ten minutes while he waited for his dog-cart. But the occasions were very rare on which he did not appear one time or another during the course of the entertainment. Mr. Stanley, of course, was always on the spot. He was a very dignified clergyman, though he had not risen to any position in the Church beyond that of Rector of Sliplin. He preached well, he read well, he looked well, he had not too much to do; he had brought up his motherless family in the most beautiful way, with never any entanglement of governesses or anything that could be found fault with for a moment. Naturally, being the father of a family, the eldest of which was twenty-two, he was not in his first youth: but very few men of forty-seven looked so young or so handsome and well set up. He took the greatest interest in the mental development of the Sliplin society, presiding at the University Extension as well as all the other meetings, and declaring publicly, to the great encouragement of all the other students, that he himself had "learned a great deal" from the Merovingians lectures and the Ceramic lectures, and those on the Arctic regions.

Mr. Stanley had three daughters, and a son who was at Cambridge; and a pretty old Rectory with beautiful rooms, and everything very graceful and handsome about him. The young people were certainly a drawback to any matrimonial aspirations on his part; but it was surmised that he entertained them all the same. Miss Mildmay was one of the people who was most deeply convinced on this subject. She had an eye which could see through stone walls in this particular. She knew when a man conceived the idea of asking a woman to marry him before he knew it himself. When she decided that a thing was to be (always in this line) it came to pass. Her judgment was infallible. She knew all the signs—how the man was being wrought up to the point of proposing, and what the woman's answer was going to be—and she took the keenest interest in the course of the little drama. It was only a pity that she had so little exercise for her faculty in that way, for there were few marriages in Sliplin. The young men went away and found their wives in other regions; the young women stayed at home, or else went off on visits where, when they had any destiny at all, they found their fate. It was therefore all the more absorbing in its interest when anything of the kind came her way. Stella's affair had been outside her orbit, and she had gained no advantage from it; but the rector and the doctor and Katherine Tredgold were a trio that kept her attention fully awake.

There was a party in the Rectory about Christmas, at which all Sliplin was present. It was a delightful house for a party. There was a pretty old hall most comfortably warmed—which is a rare attraction in halls—with a handsome oak staircase rising out of it, and a gallery above which ran along two sides. The drawing-room was also a beautiful old room, low, but large, with old furniture judiciously mingled with new, and a row of recessed windows looking to the south and clothed outside with a great growth of myrtle, with pink buds still visible at Christmas amid the frost and snow. Inside it was bright with many lamps and blazing fires; and there were several rooms to sit in, according to the dispositions of the guests—the hall where the

young people gathered together, the drawing-rooms to which favoured people went when they were bidden to go up higher, and Mr. Stanley's study, where a group of sybarites were always to be found, for it was the warmest and most luxurious of all. The hall made the greatest noise, for Bertie was there with various of his own order, home, like himself, for Christmas, and clusters of girls, all chattering at the tops of their voices, and urging each other to the point of proposing a dance, for which the hall was so suitable, and quite large enough. The drawing-room was full of an almost equally potent volume of sound, for everybody was talking, though the individual voices might be lower in tone. But in the study it was more or less quiet. The Rector himself had taken Katherine there to show her some of his books. "It would be absurd to call them priceless," he said, "for any chance might bring a set into the market, and then, of course, a price would be put upon them, varying according to the dealer's knowledge and the demand; but they are rare, and for a poor man like me to have been able to get them at all is—well, I think that, with all modesty, it is a feather in my cap; I mean, to get them at a price within my means."

"It is only people who know that ever get bargains, I think," Katherine said, in discharge of that barren duty of admiration and approval on subjects we do not understand, which makes us all responsible for many foolish speeches. Mr. Stanley's fine taste was not quite pleased with the idea that his last acquisition was a bargain, but he let that pass.

"Yes; I think that, without transgressing the limits of modesty, I may allow that to be the case. It holds in everything; those who know what a friend is attain to the best friends; those who can appreciate a noble woman——"

"Oh!" said Katherine, a little startled, "that is carrying the principle perhaps too far. I was thinking of china, you know, and things of that sort—when you see an insignificant little pot which you would not give sixpence for, and suddenly a connoisseur comes in who puts down the sixpence in a great hurry and carries it off rejoicing—and you hear afterwards that

it was priceless, too, though not, of course," she added apologetically, "like your books."

"Quite true, quite true," said the Rector blandly; "but I maintain my principle all the same, and the real prize sometimes stands unnoticed while some rubbish is chosen instead. I hope," he added in a lower tone, "that you have good news from your sister, Miss Katherine, and at this season of peace and forgiveness that your father is thinking a little more kindly——"

"My father says very little on the subject," Katherine said. She knew what he did say, which nobody else did, and the recollection made her shiver. It was very concise, as the reader knows.

"We must wait and hope—he has such excellent—perceptions," said the Rector, stumbling a little for a word, "and so much—good sense—that I don't doubt everything will come right." Then he added, bending over her, "Do you think that I could be of any use?" He took her hand for a moment, half fatherly in his tender sympathy. "Could I help you, perhaps, to induce him——"

"Oh, no, no!" cried Katherine, drawing her hand away; her alarm, however, was not for anything further that the Rector might say to herself, but in terror at the mere idea of anyone ever hearing what Mr. Tredgold said.

"Ah, well," he said with a sigh, "another time—perhaps another time." And then by way of changing the subject Katherine hurried off to a little display of drawings on the table. Charlotte Stanley, the Rector's eldest daughter, had her correspondence class like the other ladies; but it was a Drawing Union. She was devoted to art. She had made little drawings since ever she could remember in pencil and in slate-pencil, and finally in colour. Giotto could not have begun more spontaneously; and she was apt to think that had she been taken up as Giotto was, she, too, might have developed as he did. But short of that the Drawing Union was her favourite occupation. The members sent little portfolios about from one to another marked by pretty fictitious names. Char-

lotte signed herself Fenella, though it would have been difficult to tell why; for she was large and fair. The portfolio, with all the other ladies' performances, was put out to delight the guests, and along with that several drawings of her own. She came up hastily to explain them, not, perhaps, altogether to her father's satisfaction, but he yielded his place with his usual gentleness.

"We send our drawings every month," said the young artist, "and they are criticised first and then sent round. Mr. Strange, of the Water Colour Society, is our critic. He is quite distinguished; here is his little note in the corner. 'Good in places, but the sky is heavy, and there is a want of atmospheric effect'—that is Fair Rosamond's. Oh, yes, I know her other name, but we are not supposed to mention them; and this is one of mine—see what he says: 'Great improvement, shows much desire to learn, but too much stippling and great hardness in parts.' I confess I am too fond of stippling," Charlotte said. "And then every month we have a composition. 'The Power of Music' was the subject last time—that or 'Sowing the Seed.' I chose the music. You will think, perhaps, it is very simple." She lifted a drawing in which a little child in a red frock and blue pinafore stood looking up at a bird of uncertain race in a cage. "You see what he says," Charlotte continued—"Full of good intention, the colour perhaps a little crude, but there is much feeling in the sketch." Now, feeling was precisely what I aimed at," she said.

Katherine was no judge of drawing any more than she was of literature, and though the little picture did not appeal to her (for there were pictures at the Cliff, and she had lived in the same room with several Hunts and one supreme scrap of Turner—bought a bargain on the information that it was a safe investment many years ago—and therefore had an eye more cultivated than she was aware of) she was impressed by her friend's achievement, and thought it was a great thing to employ your time in such elevated ways. Evelyn, who was only seventeen and very frolicsome, wrote essays for the Mu-

tual Improvement Society. This filled Katherine, who did nothing particular, with great respect. She found a little knot of them consulting and arguing what they were to say in the next paper, and she was speechless with admiration. Inferior! Lady Jane did not think much of the Sliplin people. She had warned the girls in the days of her ascendancy not to "mix themselves up" with the village folk, not to conduct themselves as if they belonged to the nobodies. But Lady Jane had never, Katherine felt sure, written an essay in her life. She had her name on the Committee of the University Extension centre at Sliplin, but she never attended a lecture. She it was who was inferior, she and her kind: if intellect counted for anything, surely, Katherine thought, the intellect was here.

And then Dr. Burnet, came flying in, bringing a gust of fresh air with him. Though he had but a very short time to spare, he made his way to her through all the people who detained him. "I am glad to see you here; you don't despise the village parties," he said.

"Despise them!—but I am not nearly good enough for them. I feel so small and so ignorant—they are all thinking of so many things—essays and criticisms and I don't know what. It is they who should despise me."

"Oh, I don't think very much of the essays—nor would you if you saw them," Dr. Burnet said.

"I tell you all," said Miss Mildmay, "though you are so grand with your theories and so forth, it is the old-fashioned girls who know nothing about such nonsense that the gentlemen like best."

"The gentlemen—what gentlemen?" said Katherine, not at all comforted by this side of the question, and, indeed, not very clear what was meant.

"Oh, don't pretend to be a little fool," said Miss Mildmay. She was quite anxious to promote what she considered to be Katherine's two chances—the two strings she had to her bow—but to put up with this show of ignorance was too much for her. She went off angrily to where her companion sat,

yawning a little over an entertainment which depended so entirely for its success upon whether you had someone nice to talk to or not. "Kate Tredgold worries me," she said. "She pretends she knows nothing, when she is just as well up to it as either you or I."

"I am up to nothing," said Mrs. Shanks; "I only know what you say; and I don't believe Mr. Tredgold would give his daughter and only heiress to either of them—if Stella is cut off, poor thing——"

"Stella will not be cut off," said Miss Mildmay. "Mark my words. He'll go back to her sooner or later; and what a good thing if Katherine had someone to stand by her before then!"

"If you saw two straws lying together in the road you would think there was something between them," cried Mrs. Shanks, yawning more than ever. "Oh, Ruth Mildmay, fancy our being brought out on a cold night and having to pay for the Midge and all that, and nothing more in it than to wag our heads at each other about Katherine Tredgold's marriage, if it ever comes off!"

"Let me take you in to supper," said the rector, approaching with his arm held out.

And then Mrs. Shanks felt that there was compensation in all things. She was taken in one of the first, she said afterwards; not the very first—she could not expect that, with Mrs. Barry of Northcote present, and General Skelton's wife. The army and the landed gentry naturally were first. But Miss Mildmay did not follow till long after—till the doctor found her still standing in a corner, with that grim look of suppressed scorn and satirical spectatorship with which the proud neglected watch the vulgar stream pressing before them.

"Have you not been *in* yet?" the doctor said.

"No," said Miss Mildmay. "You see, I am not young to go with the girls, nor married to go with the ladies who are at the head of society. I only stand and look on."

"That is just my case," said Dr. Burnet. "I am not young to go with the girls, nor married to disport myself with Mrs.

Barry or such magnates. Let us be jolly together, for we are both in the same box."

"Don't you let that girl slip through your fingers," said Miss Mildmay solemnly, as she went "in" on his arm.

"Will she ever come within reach of my fingers?" the doctor said, shaking his head.

"You are not old, like that Stanley man; you've got no family dragging you back. I should not stand by if I were you, and let her be seduced into this house as the stepmother!" said Miss Mildmay with energy.

"Don't talk like that in the man's house. He is a good man, and we are just going to eat his sandwiches."

"If there are any left," Miss Mildmay said.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THUS it will be seen that Katherine's new position as the only daughter of her father was altogether like a new beginning of life, though she had been familiar with the place and the people for years. Stella had been the leader in everything, as has been said. When she went to a party at the Rectory, she turned it into a dance or a romp at once, and kept the Drawing Union and the Mutual Improvement Society quite in the background. Even the books which for a year or two back the rector would have liked to show Katherine privately, beguiling her into separate talks, had been thrust aside necessarily when Katherine was imperiously demanded for Sir Roger de Coverley or a round game. Therefore these more studious and elevated occupations of the little community came upon her now with the force of a surprise. Her own home was changed to her also in the most remarkable way. Stella was not a creature whom anyone fully approved of, not even her sister. She was very indifferent to the comfort and wishes of others; she loved her own amusement by whatever way it could be best obtained. She was restrained by no scruples about the proprieties, or the risk—which was one of Katherine's chief terrors—of hurting other people's feelings. She did what she liked, instantaneously, recklessly, at any risk. And her father himself, though he chuckled and applauded and took a certain pride in her cleverness even when she cheated and defied him, did not pretend to approve of Stella; but she carried her little world with her all the same. There was a current, a whirl of air about her rapid progress. The stiller figures were swept on with her whether they liked it or not; and, as a matter of fact, they generally did like it when fairly

afoat upon that quick-flowing, rippling, continuous stream of youth and life.

But now that all this movement and variety had departed nothing could be imagined more dull than Mr. Tredgold's house on the Cliff. It was like a boat cast ashore—no more commotion of the sea and waves, no more risk of hurricane or tempest, no need to shout against the noise of a cyclone, or to steer in the teeth of a gale. It was all silent, all quiet, nothing to be done, no tides to touch the motionless mass or tinkle against the dull walls of wood. When Katherine received her guests from the city, she felt as if she were showing them over a museum rather than a house. "This is the room we used to sit in when my sister was at home; I do not use it now." How often had she to say such words as these! And when the heavy tax of these visits had been paid she found herself again high and dry, once more stranded, when the last carriage had driven away.

But the rush of little parties and festivities about Christmas, when all the sons and brothers were at home, into which she was half forced by the solicitations of her neighbours, and half by her own forlorn longing to see and speak to somebody, made a not unwelcome change. The ladies in Sliplin, especially those who had sons, had always been anxious to secure the two Miss Tredgolds, the two heiresses, for every entertainment, and there was nothing mercenary in the increased attention paid to Katherine. She would have been quite rich enough with half her father's fortune to have fulfilled the utmost wishes of any aspirant in the village. The doctor and the rector had both thought of Katherine before there was any change in her fortunes—at the time when it was believed that Stella would have the lion's share of the money, as well as, evidently, of the love. In that they were quite unlike the city suitors, who only found her worth their while from the point of view of old Tredgold's entire and undivided fortune. Indeed, it is to be feared that Sliplin generally would have been overawed by the greatness of her heiresshood had it grasped this idea. But still nobody believed in the disinheriting of Stella. They believed

that she would be allowed to repent at leisure of her hasty marriage, but never that she would be finally cut off. The wooing of the rector and that of the doctor had only reached an acuter stage because now Katherine was alone. They felt that she was solitary and downcast, and wanted cheering and a companion to indemnify her for what she had lost, and this naturally increased the chances of the fortunate man who should succeed.

Mr. Stanley would (perhaps) have been alarmed at the idea of offering the position of stepmother to his children to Mr. Tredgold's sole heiress; although he would not, perhaps, have thought that in justice to his family he could have asked her to share his lot had it not been evident that she must have her part of her father's fortune. He was a moderate man—modest, as he would himself have said—and he had made up his mind that Katherine in Stella's shadow would have made a perfect wife for him. Therefore he had been frightened rather than elated by the change in her position; but with the consciousness of his previous sentiments, which were so disinterested, he had got over that, and now felt that in her loneliness a proposal such as he had to make might be even more agreeable than in other circumstances. The doctor was in something of the same mind. He was not at all like Turney and Company. He felt the increased fortune to be a drawback, making more difference between them than had existed before, but yet met this difficulty like a man, feeling that it might be got over. He would probably have hesitated more if she had been cut off without a shilling as Stella was supposed, but never believed, to be.

Neither of these gentlemen had any idea of that formula upon which Mr. Tredgold stood. The money on the table, thousand for thousand, would have been inconceivable to them. Indeed, they did not believe, notwithstanding the experience of Sir Charles Somers, that there would be much difficulty in dealing with old Tredgold. He might tie up his money, and these good men had no objection—they did not want to grasp at her money. Let him tie it up! They would neither of them have

opposed that. As to further requirements on his part they were tranquil, neither of them being penniless, or in the condition, they both felt, to be considered fortune-hunters at all. The curious thing was that they were each aware of the other's sentiments, without hating each other, or showing any great amount of jealousy. Perhaps the crisis had not come near enough to excite this; perhaps it was because they were neither of them young, and loved with composure as they did most things; yet the doctor had some seven years the advantage of the rector, and was emphatically a young man still, not middle-aged at all.

It was partly their unconscious influence that drew Katherine into the way of life which was approved by all around her. The doctor persuaded her to go to the ambulance class, which she attended weekly, very sure that she never would have had the courage to apply a tourniquet or even a bandage had a real emergency occurred. "Now, Stella could have done it," she said within herself. Stella's hands would not have trembled, nor her heart failed her. It was the rector who recommended her to join the Mutual Improvement Society, offering to look over her essays, and to lend her as many books as she might require. And it was under the auspices of both that Katherine appeared at the University Extension Lectures, and learned all about the Arctic regions and the successive expeditions that had perished there. "I wish it had been India," she said on one occasion; "I should like to know about India, now that Stella is there."

"I don't doubt in the least that after Christmas we might get a series on India. It is a great, a most interesting subject; what do you think, Burnet?"

Burnet entirely agreed with him. "Nothing better," he said; "capital contrast to the ice and the snow."

And naturally Katherine was bound to attend the new series which had been so generously got up for her. There were many pictures and much limelight, and everybody was delighted with the change.

"What we want in winter is a nice warm blazing sun, and

not something colder than we have at home," cried Mrs. Shanks.

And Katherine sat and looked at the views and wondered where Stella was, and then privately to herself wondered where James Stanford was, and what he could be doing, and if he ever thought now of the old days. There was not very much to think of, as she reflected when she asked herself that question; but still she did ask it under her breath.

"Remember, Miss Katherine, that all my books are at your service," said the rector, coming in to the end of the drawing-room where Katherine had made herself comfortable behind the screens; "and if you would like me to look at your essay, and make perhaps a few suggestions before you send it in——"

"I was not writing any essay. I was only writing to—my sister," said Katherine.

"To be sure. It is the India mail day, I remember. Excuse me for coming to interrupt you. What a thing for her to have a regular correspondent like you! You still think I couldn't be of any use to say a word to your father? You know that I am always at your disposition. Anything I can do——"

"You are very good, but I don't think it would be of any use," Katherine shivered a little, as she always did at the dreadful thought of anyone hearing what her father said.

"I am only good to myself when I try to be of use to you," the rector said, and he added, with a little vehemence, "I only wish you would understand how dearly I should like to think that you would come to me in any emergency, refer to me at once, whatever the matter might be——"

"Indeed, Mr. Stanley, I understand, and I do," she said, raising her eyes to his gratefully. "You remember how I appealed to you that dreadful time, and how much—how much you did for us?"

"Ah, you sent Burnet to me," he said, "that's not exactly the same. Of course, I did what I could; but what I should like would be that you should come with full confidence to

tell me anything that vexes you, or to ask me to do anything you want done, like——"

"I know," she said. "Like Charlotte and Evelyn. And, indeed, I should, indeed I will—trust me for that."

The rector drew back, as if she had flung in his face the vase of clear water which was waiting on the table beside her for the flowers she meant to put in it. He gave an impatient sigh and walked to the window, with a little movement of his hands which Katherine did not understand.

"Oh, has it begun to snow?" she said, for the sky was very grey, as if full of something that must soon overflow and fall, and everybody had been expecting snow for twenty-four hours past.

"No, it has not begun to snow," he said. "It is pelting hailstones—no, I don't mean that; nothing is coming down as yet—at least, out of the sky. Perhaps I had better leave you to finish your letter."

"Oh, there is no hurry about that. There are hours yet before post-time, and I have nearly said all I have to say. I have been telling her I am studying India. It is a big subject," Katherine said. "And how kind you and Dr. Burnet were, getting this series of lectures instead of another for me—though I think everybody is interested, and the pictures are beautiful with the limelight."

"I should have thought of it before," said the rector. "As for Burnet, he wanted some scientific series about evolution and that sort of thing. Medical men are always mad after science, or what they believe to be such. But as soon as I saw how much you wished it——"

"A thing one has something to do with is always so much the more interesting," Katherine said, half apologetically.

"I hope you know that if it were left to me I should choose only those subjects that you are interested in."

"Oh, no," cried Katherine, "not so much as that. You are so kind, you want to please and interest as all."

"Kindness is one thing; but there are other motives that tell still more strongly." The rector went to and from the

window, where Katherine believed him to be looking out for the snow, which lingered so long, to the table, where she still trifled with her pen in her hand, and had not yet laid it down to put the flowers which lay in a little basket into water. The good clergyman was more agitated than he should have thought possible. Should he speak? He was so much wound up to the effort that it seemed as if it must burst forth at any moment, in spite of himself; but, on the other hand, he was afraid lest he might precipitate matters. He watched her hands involuntarily every time he approached her, and then he said to himself that when she had put down the pen and begun to arrange the flowers, he would make the plunge, but not till then. That should be his sign.

It was a long time before this happened. Katherine held her pen as if it had been a shield, though she was not at all aware of the importance thus assigned to it. She had a certain sense of protection in its use. She thought that if she kept up the fiction of continuing her letter Mr. Stanley would go away; and somehow she did not care for him so much as usual to-day. She had always had every confidence in him, and would have gone to him at any time, trusting to his sympathy and kindness; but to be appealed to to do this, as if it were some new thing, confused her mind. Why, of course she had faith in him, but she did not like the look with which he made that appeal. Why should he look at her like that? He had known her almost all her life, and taught her her Catechism and her duty, which, though they may be endearing things, are not endearing in that way. If Katherine had been asked in what way, she would probably have been unable to answer; but yet in her heart she wished very much that Mr. Stanley would go away.

At last, when it seemed to her that this was hopeless—that he would not take the hint broadly furnished by her unfinished letter—she did put down the pen, and, pushing her writing-book away, drew towards her the little basket of flowers from the conservatory, which the gardener brought her every day. They were very waxen and winterly, as flowers still are in January, and she took them up one by one, arranging them so as

to make the most of such colour as there was. The rector had turned at the end of his little promenade when she did so, and came back rapidly when he heard the little movement. She was aware of the quickened step, and said, smiling, "Well, has the snow begun at last?"

"There is no question of snow," he said hurriedly, and Katherine heard with astonishment the panting of his breath, and looked up—to see a very flushed and anxious countenance directed towards her. Mr. Stanley was a handsome man of his years, but his was a style which demanded calm and composure and the tranquillity of an even mind to do it justice. He was excited now, which was very unbecoming; his cheeks were flushed, his lips parted with hasty breathing. "Katherine," he said, "it is something much more important than—any change outside." He waved his hand almost contemptuously at the window, as if the snow was a slight affair, not worth mentioning. "I am afraid," he said, standing with his hand on the table looking down upon her, yet rather avoiding her steady, half-wondering look, "that you are too little self-conscious to have observed lately—any change in me."

"I don't know," she said faltering, looking up at him; "is there anything the matter, really? I have thought once or twice—that you looked a little disturbed."

It flashed into her mind that there might be something wrong in the family, that Bertie might have been extravagant, that help might be wanted from her rich father. Oh, poor Mr. Stanley! if his handsome stately calm should be disturbed by such a trouble as that? Katherine's look grew very kind, very sympathising as she looked up into his face.

"I have often, I am sure, looked disturbed. Katherine, it is not a small matter when a man like me finds his position changed in respect to—one like yourself—by an overmastering sentiment which has taken possession of him he knows not how, and which he is quite unable to restrain."

"Rector!" cried Katherine astonished, looking up at him with even more feeling than before. "Mr. Stanley! have I done anything?"

"That shows," he cried, with something like a stamp of his foot and an impatient movement of his hand, "how much I have to contend with. You think of me as nothing but your clergyman—a—a sort of pedagogue—and your thought is that he is displeased—that there is something he is going to find fault with——"

"No," she said. "You are too kind to find fault; but—I am sure I never neglect anything you say to me. Tell me what it is—and I—I will not take offence. I will do my very best——"

"Oh, how hard it is to make you understand! You put me on a pedestal—whereas it is you who—— Katherine! do you know that you are not a little girl any longer, but a woman, and a—most attractive one? I have struggled against it, knowing that was not the light in which I can have appeared to you, but it's too strong for me. I have come to tell you of a feeling which has existed for years on my part—and to ask you—if there is any possibility, any hope, to ask you—to marry me——" The poor rector! his voice almost died away in his throat. He put one knee to the ground—not, I need not say, with any prayerful intention, but only to put himself on the same level with her, with his hands on the edge of her table, and gazed into her face.

"To—— What did you say, Mr. Stanley?" she asked, with horror in her eyes.

"Don't be hasty, for the sake of heaven! Don't condemn me unheard. I know all the disparities, all the—— But, Katherine, my love for you is more than all that. I have been trying to keep it down for years. I said, to marry me—to marry me, my dear and only——"

"Do you mean that you are on your knees to me, a girl whom you have catechised?" cried Katherine severely, holding her head high.

The rector stumbled up in great confusion to his feet. "No, I did not mean that. I was not kneeling to you. I was only—— Oh, Katherine, how small a detail is this! God knows I do not want to make myself absurd in your

eyes. I am much older than you are. I am—but your true lover notwithstanding—for years; and your most fond and faithful—— Katherine! if you will be my wife——”

“And the mother of Charlotte and Bertie!” said Katherine, looking at him with shining eyes. “Charlotte is a year younger than I am. She comes between Stella and me; and Bertie thinks he is in love with me too. Is it *that* you come and offer to a girl, Mr. Stanley? Oh, I know. Girls who are governesses and poor have it offered to them and are grateful. But I am as well off as you are. And do you think it likely that I would want to change my age and be my own mother for the sake of—what? Being married? I don’t want to be married. Oh, Mr. Stanley, it is wicked of you to confuse everything—to change all our ways of looking at each other—to——” Katherine almost broke down into a torrent of angry tears, but controlled herself for wrath’s sake.

The rector stood before her with his head down, as sorely humiliated a man as ever clergyman was. “If you take it in that light, what can I say? I had hoped you would not take it in that light. I am not an old man. I have not been accustomed to—apologise for myself,” he said, with a gleam of natural self-assertion. He, admired of ladies for miles round—to the four seas, so to speak—on every hand. He could have told her things! But the man was *digne*; he was no traitor nor ungrateful for kindness shown him. “If you think, Katherine, that the accident of my family and of a very early first marriage is so decisive, there is perhaps nothing more to be said. But many men only begin life at my age; and I think it is ungenerous—to throw my children in my teeth—when I was speaking to you—of things so different——”

“Oh, Mr. Stanley,” cried Katherine, subdued, “I am very, very sorry. I did not mean to throw—anything in your teeth. But how could anyone forget Charlotte and Bertie and Evelyn and the rest? Do you call them an accident—all the family?” Katherine’s voice rose till it was almost shrill in the thought of this injury to her friends. “But I only think

of you as their father and my clergyman—and always very, very kind," she said.

The flowers had never yet got put into the water. She had thrown them down again into the basket. The empty vase stood reproachfully full and useless, reflecting in its side a tiny sparkle of the firelight; and the girl sitting over them, and the man standing by her, had both of them downcast heads, and did not dare to look at each other. This group continued for a moment, and then he moved again towards the window. "It has begun at last," he said in a strange changed tone. "It is snowing fast."

And the rector walked home in a blinding downfall, and was a white man, snow covered, when he arrived at home, where his children ran out to meet him, exclaiming at his beard which had grown white, and his hair, which, when his hat was taken off, exhibited a round of natural colour fringed off with ends of snow. The family surrounded him with chatterings and caresses, pulling off his coat, unwinding his scarf, shaking off the snow, leading him into the warm room by the warm fire, running off for warm shoes and everything he could want. An accident! The accident of a family! He submitted with a great effort over himself, but in his heart he would have liked to push them off, the whole band of them, into the snow.

CHAPTER XXV.

It will perhaps be thought very unfeeling of Katherine to have received as she did this unlooked for elderly lover. All Siplin, it is true, could have told her for some time past that the Rector was in love with her, and meant to make her an offer, and Miss Mildmay believed that she had been aware of it long before that. But it had never occurred to Katherine that the father of Charlotte and Gerard was occupied with herself in any way, or that such an idea could enter his mind. He had heard her say her catechism! He had given Charlotte in her presence the little sting of a reproof about making a noise, and other domestic sins which Katherine was very well aware she was intended to share. In the *douceurs* which, there was no denying, he had lately shed about, she had thought of nothing but a fatherly intention to console her in her changed circumstances; and to think that all the time this old middle-aged man, this father of a family, had it in his mind to make her his wife! Katherine let her flowers lie drooping, and paced up and down the room furious, angry even with herself. Forty-five is a tremendous age to three-and-twenty; and it was the first time she had ever received a proposal straight in the face, so to speak. Turny and Company had treated with her father, but had retreated from before her own severe aspect when she gave it to be seen how immovable she was. And to think that her first veritable proposal should be this—a thing that filled her with indignation! What! did the man suppose for a moment that she, his daughter's friend, would marry him? Did all men think that a girl would do anything to be married?—or what did they think?

Katherine could not realise that Mr. Stanley to the Rector was not at all the same person that he was to her. The Rector thought himself in the prime of life, and so he was. The children belonged to him and he was accustomed to them, and did not, except now and then, think them a great burden; but himself was naturally the first person in his thoughts. He knew that he was a very personable man, that his voice was considered beautiful, and his aspect (in the pulpit) imposing. His features were good, his height was good, he was in full health and vigour. Why shouldn't he have asked anybody to marry him? The idea that it was an insult to a girl never entered his mind. And it was no insult. He was not even poor or in pursuit of her wealth. No doubt her wealth would make a great difference, but that was not in the least his motive, for he had thought of her for years. And in his own person he was a man any woman might have been proud of. All this was very visible to him.

But to Katherine it only appeared that Mr. Stanley was forty-five, that he was the father of a girl as old as herself, and of a young man, whom she had laughed at, indeed, but who also had wished to make love to her. What would Gerard say? This was the first thing that changed Katherine's mood, that made her laugh. It brought in a ludicrous element. What Charlotte would say was not half so funny. Charlotte would be horrified, but she would probably think that any woman might snatch at a man so admired as her father, and the fear of being put out of her place would occupy her and darken her understanding. But the thought of Gerard made Katherine laugh and restored her equilibrium. Strengthened by this new view she came down from her pinnacle of indignation and began to look after the things she had to do. The snow went on falling thickly, a white moving veil across every one of the windows; the great flickering flakes falling now quickly, now slowly, and everything growing whiter and whiter against the half-seen grey of the sky. This whiteness shut in the house, encircling it as with a flowing mantle. Nobody would come near the house that afternoon, nobody

would come out that could help it—not even the midge was likely to appear along the white path. The snow made an end of visitors, and Katherine felt herself shut up within it, condemned not to hear any voice or meet with any incident for the rest of the day. It was not a cheering sensation. She finished her letter to Stella, and paused and wondered whether she should tell her what had happened; but she fortunately remembered that a high standard of honour forbade the disclosure of secrets like this, which were the secrets of others as well as her own. She had herself condemned from that high eminence with much indignation the way in which other girls blazoned such secrets. She would not be like one of them. And besides, Stella and her husband would laugh and make jokes in bad taste and hold up the Rector to the laughter of the regiment, which would not be fair though Katherine was so angry with him. When she had finished her letter she returned to the flowers, and finally arranged them as she had intended to do long ago. And then she went and stood for a long time at the window watching the snow falling. It was very dull to see nobody, to be alone, all alone, for all these hours. There was a new novel fresh from Mudie's on the table, which was always something to look forward to; but even a novel is but a poor substitute for society when you have been so shaken and put out of your *assiette* as Katherine had been by a personal incident. Would she have told anyone if anyone had come? She said to herself, "No, certainly not." But as she was still thrilling and throbbing all over, and and felt it almost impossible to keep still, I cannot feel so sure as she was that she would not have followed a multitude to do evil, and betrayed her suitor's secret by way of relieving her own mind. But I am sure that she would have felt very sorry had she done so as soon as the words were out of her mouth.

She had seated herself by the fire and taken up her novel, not with the content and pleasure which a well-conditioned girl ought to exhibit at the sight of a new story in three volumes (in which form it is always most welcome, according

to my old-fashioned ideas) and a long afternoon to enjoy it in, but still with resignation and a pulse beating more quietly—when there arose sounds which indicated a visit after all. Katherine listened eagerly, then subsided as the footsteps and voices faded again, going off to the other end of the house.

“Dr. Burnet to see papa,” she said half with relief, half with expectation. She had no desire to see Dr. Burnet. She could not certainly to him breathe the faintest sigh of a revelation, or relieve her mind by the most distant hint of anything that had happened. Still, he was somebody. It was rather agreeable to give him tea. The bread and butter disappeared so quickly, and it had come to be such a familiar operation to watch those strong white teeth getting through it. Certainly he had wonderful teeth. Katherine gave but a half attention to her book, listening to the sounds in the house. Her father’s door closed, he had gone in, and then after a while the bell rang and the footsteps became audible once more in the corridor. She closed her book upon her hand wondering if he would come this way, or—— He was coming this way! She pushed her chair away from the hearth, feeling that, what with the past excitement and the glow of the fire, her cheeks were ablaze.

But Dr. Burnet did not seem to see this when he came in. She had gone to the window by that time to look out again upon the falling snow. It was falling, falling, silent and white and soft, in large flakes like feathers, or rather like white swan’s down. He joined her there and they stood looking at it together, and saying to each other how it seemed to close round the house and wrap everything up as in a downy mantle.

“I like to see it,” the doctor said, “which is very babyish, I know. I like to see that flutter in the air and the great soft flakes dilating as they fall. But it puts a great stop to everything. You have had no visitors, I suppose, to-day?”

“Oh, yes, before it came on,” said Katherine; and then she added in a voice which she felt to be strange even while she spoke, “The Rector was here.”

That was all—not another word did she say; but Dr. Burnet gave her a quick look, and he knew as well as the reader knows what had happened. The Rector, then, had struck his blow. No doubt it was by deliberate purpose that he had chosen a day threatening snow, when nobody was likely to interrupt him. And he had made his explanation and it had not been well received. The doctor divined all this and his heart gave a jump of pleasure, though Katherine had not said a word, and indeed had not looked at him, but stood steadily with a blank countenance in which there was nothing to be read, gazing out upon the snow. Sometimes a blank countenance displays more than the frankest speech.

“He is a handsome man—for his time of life,” Dr. Burnet said, he could not tell why.

“Yes?” said Katherine, as if she were waiting for further evidence; and then she added, “It is droll to think of that as being a quality of the Rector—just as you would say it of a boy.”

“Do you think that handsome is as handsome does, Miss Katherine? I should not have expected that of you. I always thought you made a great point of good looks.”

“I like nice-looking people,” she said, and in spite of herself gave a glance aside at the doctor, who in spite of those fine teeth and very good eyes and other points of advantage, could not have been called handsome by the most partial of friends.

“You are looking at me,” he said with a laugh, “and the reflection is obvious, though perhaps it is only my vanity that imagines you to have made it. I am not much to brag of, I know it. I am very ‘umble. A man who knows he is good-looking must have a great advantage in life to begin with. It must give him so much more confidence wherever he makes his appearance—at least for the first time.”

“Do you think so?” she said. “I should think one would forget it so quickly, both the possessor himself and those who look at him. If people are *nice* you think of that and not of their beauty, unless——”

"Unless what, Miss Katherine? You can't think how interesting this talk is to me. Tell me something on which an ugly man can rest and take courage. You are thinking of John Wilkes' famous saying that he only wanted half-an-hour's start of the handsomest man——"

"Who was John Wilkes?" said Katherine with the serene ignorance. "I suppose one of the men one ought to know; but then I know so little. After a year of the Mutual Improvement Society——"

"Don't trouble about that," cried the doctor, "but my ambulance classes are really of the greatest use. I do hope you will attend them. Suppose there was an accident before your eyes—on the lawn there, and nobody within reach—what should you do?"

"Tremble all over and be of use to nobody," Katherine said with a shudder.

"That is just what I want to obviate—that is just what ought to be obviated. You, with your light touch and your kind heart and your quick eye——"

"Have I a quick eye and a light touch?" said Katherine with a laugh; "and how do you know? It is understood that every girl must have a kind heart. On the whole, I would rather write an essay, I think, than be called upon to render first aid. My hand is not at all steady if my touch is light."

She lifted one of the vases as she spoke to change its position and her hand shook. He looked at it keenly, and she, not thinking of so sudden a test, put down the vase in a hurry with a wave of colour coming over her face.

"That's not natural, that's worry, that's excitement," Dr. Burnet said.

"The outlook is not very exciting, is it?" cried Katherine; "one does not come in the way of much excitement at Sliplin, and I have not even seen Miss Mildmay and Mrs. Shanks. No, it is natural, doctor. So you see how little use it would be to train me. Come to the fire and have some tea."

"I must not give myself this pleasure too often," he said. "I find myself going back to it in imagination when I am out in the wilds. It is precious cold in my dog-cart facing the wind, Miss Katherine. I say to myself, Now the tea is being brought in in the drawing-room on the Cliff, now it is being poured out. I smell the fragrance of it driving along the bitter downs; and then I go and order some poor wretch the beastliest draught that can be compounded to avenge myself for getting no tea."

"You should give them nothing but nice things, then, when you do have tea—as now," said Katherine.

He came after her to where the little tea-table shone and sparkled in the firelight, and took from her hand the cup of tea she offered him, and stood with his back to the fire holding it in his hand. His groom was driving his dog-cart round and round the snowy path, crossing the window from time to time, a dark apparition amid the falling of the snow. What the thoughts of the groom might be, looking in through the great window on this scene of comfort, the figure of Katherine in her pretty dress and colour stooping over the table, and his master behind standing against the firelight with his cup of tea, nobody asked. Perhaps he was making little comparisons as to his lot, perhaps only thinking of the time when he should be able to thrust his hands into his pockets and the doctor should have the reins. Yet Dr. Burnet did not ignore his groom. "There," he said, "is fate awaiting me. This time she has assumed the innocent form of John Dobbs, my groom. I have got ten miles to drive, there and back, to see Mrs. Crumples, who could do perfectly well without me, and then to the Chine for a moment to ascertain if the new man there has digested his early dinner, and then to Steephill to look after the servants' hall. I am not good enough, except on an emergency, for the family or Lady Jane."

"I would not go more, then, if it is only for the servants' hall," cried Katherine.

"Why not?" he said. "I consider Mrs. Cole, the cook, is quite as valuable a member of society as Lady Jane. The

world would not come to an end if Lady Jane were absent for a day, or laid up, but it would very nearly—at Steephill—if anything happened to the cook."

"You said you were 'unable, Dr. Burnet, and I did not believe you. I see that you are really so, now."

"Ah, there I disagree with you," he said, a little flush on his face. "I am 'unable about my personal appearance, but I only don't mind with Lady Jane. She thinks of me merely as the general practitioner from Sliplin, which shows she doesn't know anything—for I am more than a general practitioner."

"I know," cried Katherine quickly, half with a generous desire not to leave him to sing his own praises, and half with a wondering scorn that he should think it worth the while; "you will be a great physician one of these days."

"I hope so," he said quietly. Then, after a while, "But I am still more than that; at least, what would seem more in Lady Jane's eyes. I am not a doctor only, Miss Katherine. I have not such a bad little estate behind me. My uncle has it now, but I'm the man after him; and a family a good deal better known than the Uffingtons, who are not a century old." He said this with a little excitement, and a flourish in his hand of the teaspoon with which he had been stirring his tea.

Jim Dobbs, driving past the window, white with snow, yet looking like a huge blackness in the solidity of the group, he and his high coat and his big horse amid the falling feathers, caught the gesture and wondered within himself what the doctor could be about; while Katherine, looking up at him from the tea-table, was scarcely less surprised. Why should he tell her this? Why at all? Why now? The faint wonder in her look made Dr. Burnet blush.

"What a fool I am! As if you cared about that," he said with a stamp of his foot, in impatience with himself, and shame.

"Oh, yes, I care about it. I am glad to hear of it. But—Dr. Burnet, let me give you another cup of tea."

"But," he said, "you think what have I to do with the man's antecedents? You see I want you to know that I can put my foot forward sometimes—like——" he paused for a moment and laughed, putting down his cup hastily. "No more! No more! I must tear myself from this enchanted cliff, or Jim Dobbs will mistake the window for the stable door—like my elderly friend, Miss Katherine," he said over his shoulder as he went away.

Like—his elderly friend? Who was his elderly friend, and what did the doctor mean? Katherine watched from the window while Burnet got into his dog-cart and whirled away at a very different pace from that of his groom. She could not see this from her window, but listened till the sounds died away, looking out upon the snow. What a fascination that snow had, falling, falling, without any dark object now to disturb its absolute possession of the world! Katherine stood for a long time watching before she went back to her novel, which was only when the lamps were brought in, changing the aspect of the place. Did she care for Dr. Burnet's revelations, or divine the object of them? In the first place not at all; in the second, I doubt whether she took the trouble to ask herself the question.

CHAPTER XXVI.

BUT though Dr. Burnet had been 'umble about his position at Steephill, and considered himself only as the physician of the servants' hall, he was not invariably left in that secondary position. On this particular snowy evening, when master and horse and man were all eager to get home in view of the drifting of the snow, which was already very deep, and the darkness of the night, which made it dangerous, Lady Jane—who was alone at Steephill, i.e. without any house party, and enjoying the sole society of Sir John, her spouse, which was not lively—bethought herself that she would like to consult the doctor. She did not pretend that she had more than a cold, but then a cold may develop into anything, as all the world knows. It was better to have a talk with Dr. Burnet than not to say a word to anybody, and to speak of her cold rather than not to speak at all. Besides, she did want to hear something of old Tredgold, and whether Katherine was behaving well, and what chance there might be for Stella. The point of behaviour in Katherine about which Lady Jane was anxious was whether or not she was keeping her sister's claims before her father—her conduct in other respects was a matter of absolute indifference to her former patroness.

"I have not been in Sliplin for quite a long time," she said. "It may be a deficiency in me, but, you know, I don't very much affect your village, Dr. Burnet."

"No; few people do; unless they want it, or something in it," the doctor said as he made out his prescription, of which I think *eau sucrée*, or something like it, was the chief ingredient.

"I don't know what I should want in it or with it," said

Lady Jane with a touch of impatience. And then she added, modifying her tone, "Tell me about the Tredgolds, Dr. Burnet. How is the old man? Not a very satisfactory patient, I should think—so fond of his own way; especially when you have not Stella at hand to make him amenable."

"He is not a bad patient," said Dr. Burnet. "He does not like his own way better than most old men. He allows himself to be taken good care of on the whole."

"Oh, I am glad to hear so good an opinion of him. I thought he was very headstrong. Now, you know, I don't want you to betray your patient's secrets, Dr. Burnet."

"No," he said; "and it wouldn't matter, I fear, if you did," he continued after a pause; "but I know no secrets of the Tredgolds, so I am perfectly safe——"

"That's rather rude," said Lady Jane, "but of course it's the right thing to say; and of course also you know all about Stella and her elopement and the dreadful disappointment. I confess, for my own part, I did not think he could stand out against her for a day."

"He is a man who knows his own mind very clearly, Lady Jane."

"So it appears. And will he hold out, do you think, till the bitter end? Can Katherine do nothing? Couldn't she do something if she were to try? I mean for those poor Somers—they are great friends of mine. He is, you know, a kind of relation. And poor Stella! Do tell me, Dr. Burnet, do you think there is no hope? Couldn't you do something yourself? A doctor at a man's bedside has great power."

"It is not a power I would ever care to exercise," Dr. Burnet said.

"Oh, you are too scrupulous! And when you consider how poor they are, doctor!—really badly off. Why, they have next to nothing! The pay, of course, is doubled in India, but beyond that—— Think of Charlie Somers living on his pay! And then there is Stella the most expensive little person, accustomed to every luxury you can think of, and never used to deny herself anything. It is extremely hard

lines for them, certain as they were that her father—— Oh, I can't help thinking, Dr. Burnet, that Katherine could do something if she chose."

"Then you may be quite at ease, Lady Jane, for I am sure she will choose—to do a hardness to anyone, let alone her sister——"

"Ah, Dr. Burnet," cried Lady Jane, shaking her head, "it is so difficult to tell in what subtle forms self-interest will get in. Now there is one thing that I wish I could see as a way of settling the matter. I should like to see Katherine Tredgold married to some excellent, honourable man. Oh, I am not without sources of information. I have heard a little bird here and there. What a good thing if there was such a man, who would do poor little Stella justice and give her her share! Half of Mr. Tredgold's fortune would be a very handsome fortune. It would make all the difference to—say, a rising professional man."

Dr. Burnet pretended to make a little change in the prescription he had been writing. His head was bent over the writing-table, which was an advantage.

"I have no doubt half of Mr. Tredgold's fortune would be very nice to have," he said, "but unfortunately Miss Katherine is not married, nor do I know who are the candidates for her hand."

"I assure you," said Lady Jane, "if there was such a person I should take care to do everything I could to further his views. I have not seen much of Katherine lately, but I should make a point of asking her and him to meet here. There is nothing I would not do to bring such a thing about, and—and secure her happiness, you know. You will scarcely believe it, but it is the truth, that Katherine was always the one I liked best."

What a delightful, satisfactory, successful lie one can sometimes tell by telling the truth. Dr. Burnet, who loved Katherine Tredgold, was touched by this last speech—there was the ring of sincerity in the words; and though Lady Jane had not in the least the welfare of Katherine in her head at this moment, still, these words were undoubtedly true.

He sat for some time making marks with the pen on the paper before him, and Lady Jane was so much interested in his reply that she did not press for it, but sat quite still, letting him take his time.

"Have you any idea?" he said, making as though he were about to alter the prescription for the third time, "on what ground Mr. Tredgold refused Sir Charles Somers, who was not ineligible as marriages go?" His extreme coolness, and the slight respect with which he spoke had a quite subduing influence upon Lady Jane. "Was it—for his private character, perhaps?"

"Nothing of the sort," cried Lady Jane. "Do you know Charlie Somers is a cousin of mine, Dr. Burnet?"

"That," said the doctor, "though an inestimable advantage, would not save him from having had—various things said about him, Lady Jane."

"No," she said with a laugh. "I acknowledge it. Various things have been said of him. The reason given was simply ludicrous. I don't know if Charlie invented it—but I don't think he was clever enough to invent it. It was something about putting money down pound for pound, or shilling for shilling, or some nonsense, and that he would give Stella to nobody that couldn't do that. On the face of it that is folly, you know."

"I am not so sure that it is folly. I have heard him say something of the kind; meaning, I suppose, that any son-in-law he would accept would have to be as wealthy as himself."

"But that is absolute madness, Dr. Burnet! Good heavens! who that was as rich as old Tredgold could desire to be old Tredgold's son-in-law? It is against all reason. A man might forgive to the girls who are so nice in themselves that they had such a father; but what object could one as rich as himself— Oh! it is sheer idiocy, you know."

"Not to him; and he, after all, is the person most concerned," said Dr. Burnet, with his head cast down and rather a dejected look about him altogether. "The thought was not

cheerful to himself any more than to Lady Jane, and as a matter of fact he had not realised it before.

"But it cannot be," she cried, "it cannot be; it is out of the question. Oh, you are a man of resource; you must find our some way to baffle this old curmudgeon. There must, there must," she exclaimed, "be some way out of it, if you care to try."

"Trying will not invent thousands of pounds, alas! nor can the man who has the greatest fund of resource but no money do it anyhow," said Dr. Burnet sententiously. "There may be a dodge——"

"That is what I meant. There must be a dodge to—to get you out of it," she cried.

"It is possible that the man whose existence you divine might not care to get a wife—if she would have him to begin with—by a dodge, Lady Jane."

"Oh, rubbish!" cried the great lady, "we are not so high-minded as all that. I am of opinion that in that way anything, everything can be done. Charlie Somers is a fool and Stella another; but to a sensible pair with an understanding between them and plenty of time to work—and an old sick man," Lady Jane laid an involuntary emphasis on the word sick—then stopped and reddened visibly, though her countenance was rather weather-beaten and did not easily show.

"A sick man—to be taken advantage of? No, I think that would scarcely do," he said. "A sensible pair with an understanding, indeed—but then the understanding—there's the difficulty."

"No," cried Lady Jane, anxiously cordial to wipe away the stain of her unfortunate suggestion. "Not at all—the most natural thing in the world—where there is real feeling, Dr. Burnet, on one side, and a lonely, sensitive girl on the other——"

"A lonely, sensitive girl," he repeated. And then he looked up in Lady Jane's face with a short laugh—but made no farther remark.

Notwithstanding the safeguard of her complexion, Lady

Jane this time grew very red indeed; but having nothing to say for herself, she was wise and made no attempt to say it. And he got up, having nothing further to add by any possibility to his prescription, and put it into her hand.

"I must make haste home," he said, "the snow is very blinding, and the roads by this time will be scarcely distinguishable."

"I am sorry to have kept you so long—with my ridiculous cold, which is really nothing. But Dr. Burnet," she said, putting her hand on his sleeve, "you will think of what I have said. Let justice be done to those poor Somers. Their poverty is something tragic. They had so little expectation of anything of the kind."

"It is most unlikely that I can be of any use to them, Lady Jane," he said a little stiffly, as he accepted her outstretched hand.

Perhaps Lady Jane had more respect for him than ever before. She held his prescription in her hand and looked at it for a moment.

"I think I'll take it," she said to herself as if making a heroic resolution. She had really a little cold.

As for the doctor, he climbed up into his dog-cart and took the reins from the benumbed hands of Jim, who was one mass of whiteness now instead of the black form sprinkled over with flakes of white which he had appeared at the Cliff. It was a difficult thing to drive home between the hedges, which were no longer visible, and with the big snow-flakes melting into his eyes and confusing the atmosphere, and he had no time to think as long as he was still out in the open country, without even the lights of Sliplin to guide him. It was very cold, and his hands soon became as benumbed as Jim's, with the reins not sensible at all through his big gloves to his chilled fingers.

"I think we should turn to the left, here?" he said to Jim, who answered "Yessir," with his teeth chattering, "or do you think it should perhaps be to the right?"

Jim said "Yessir," again, dull to all proprieties.

If Jim had been by himself he would probably have gone to sleep, and allowed the mare to find her own way home, which very likely she would have done; but Dr. Burnet could not trust to such a chance. To think much of what had been said to him was scarcely possible in these circumstances. But when the vague and confused glimmer of the Sliplin lights through the snow put his mind at rest, it cannot but be said that Dr. Burnet found a great many thoughts waiting to seize hold upon him. He was not perhaps surprised that Lady Jane should have divined his secret. He had no particular desire to conceal it, and though he did not receive Lady Jane's offer with enthusiasm, he could not but feel that her friendship and assistance would be of great use to him—in fact, if not with Katherine, at least with other things. It would be good for him professionally, even this one visit, and the prescription for Lady Jane, not for Mrs. Cole, which must be made up at the chemist's, would do him good. A man who held the position of medical attendant at Steephill received a kind of warrant of skill from the fact, which would bring other patients of distinction. When Dr. Burnet got home, and got into dry and comfortable clothes, and found no impatient messenger awaiting him, it was with a grateful sense of ease that he gave himself up to the study of this subject by the cheerful fire. His mind glanced over the different suggestions of Lady Jane, tabulating and classifying them as if they had been scientific facts. There was that hint about the old sick man, which she had herself blushed for before it was fully uttered, and at which Dr. Burnet now grinned in mingled wrath and ridicule. To take advantage of an old sick man—as being that old man's medical attendant and desirous of marrying his daughter—was a suggestion at which Burnet could afford to laugh, though fiercely, and with an exclamation not complimentary to the intentions of Lady Jane. But there were other things which required more careful consideration.

Should he follow these other suggestions, he asked himself? Should he become a party to her plan, and get her support,

and accept the privileges of a visitor at her house as she had almost offered, and meet Katherine there, which would probably be good for Katherine in other ways as well as for himself? There was something very tempting in this idea, and Dr. Burnet was not mercenary in his feeling towards Katherine, nor indisposed to do "justice to Stella" in the almost incredible case that it ever should be in his power to dispose of Mr. Tredgold's fortune. He could not help another short laugh to himself at the absurdity of the idea. He to dispose of Mr. Tredgold's fortune! So many things were taken for granted in this ridiculous hypothesis. Katherine's acceptance and consent for one thing, of which he was not at all sure. She had evidently sent the Rector about his business, which made him glad, yet gave him a little thrill of anxiety too, for, though he was ten years younger than the Rector, and had no family to encumber him, yet Mr. Stanley, on the other hand, was a handsome man, universally pleasing, and perhaps more desirable in respect to position than an ordinary country practitioner—a man who dared not call his body, at least, whatever might be said of his soul, his own; and who had as yet had no opportunity of distinguishing himself. If she repulsed the one so summarily, would she not have in all probability the same objections to the other? At twenty-three a man of thirty-five is slightly elderly as well as one of forty-seven.

Supposing, however, that Katherine should make no objection, which was a very strong step for a man who did not in the least believe that at the present moment she had even thought of him in that light—there was her father to be taken into account. He had heard Mr. Tredgold say that about the thousand for thousand told down on the table, and he had heard it from the two ladies of the midge; but without, perhaps, paying much attention or putting any great faith in it. How could he table thousand for thousand against Mr. Tredgold? The idea was ridiculous. He had the reversion of that little, but ancient, estate in the North, of which he had been at such pains to inform Katherine; and he had a little

money from his mother; and his practice, which was a good enough practice, but not likely to produce thousands for some time at least to come. He had said there might be a dodge—and, as a matter of fact, there had blown across his mind a suggestion of a dodge, how he might perhaps persuade his uncle to “table” the value of Bunhope on his side. But what was the value of Bunhope to the millions of old Tredgold? He might, perhaps, say that he wanted nothing more with Katherine than the equivalent of what he brought; but he doubted whether the old man would accept that compromise. And certainly, if he did so, there could be no question of doing justice to Stella out of the small share he would have of her father's fortune. No; he felt sure Mr. Tredgold would exact the entire pound of flesh, and no less; that he would no more reduce his daughter's inheritance than her husband's fortune, and that no dodge would blind the eyes of the acute, businesslike old man.

This was rather a despairing point of view, from which Dr. Burnet tried to escape by thinking of Katherine herself, and what might happen could he persuade her to fall in love with him. That would make everything so much more agreeable; but would it make it easier? Alas! falling in love on Stella's part had done no good to Somers; and Stella, though now cast off and banished, had possessed a far greater influence over her father than Katherine had ever had. Dr. Burnet was by no means destitute of sentiment in respect to her. Indeed, it is very probable that had Katherine had no fortune at all he would still have wished, and taken earlier more decisive steps, to make her aware that he wished to secure her for his wife; but the mere existence of a great fortune changes the equilibrium of everything. And as it was there, Dr. Burnet felt that to lose it, if there was any possible way of securing it, would be a great mistake. He was the old man's doctor, who ought to be grateful to him for promoting his comfort and keeping him alive; and he was Katherine's lover, and the best if not the only one there was. And he had free access to the house at all seasons, and a comfortable standing in the drawing-room as

well as in the master's apartment. Surely something must be made of these advantages by a man with his eyes open, neglecting no opportunity. And, on the other hand, there was always the chance that old Tredgold might die, thus simplifying matters. The doctor's final decision was that he would do nothing for the moment, but wait and follow the leading of circumstances; always keeping up his watch over Katherine, and endeavouring to draw her interest, perhaps in time her affections, towards himself—while, on the other hand, it would commit him to nothing to accept Lady Jane's help, assuring her that—in the case which he felt to be so unlikely of ever having any power in the matter—he would certainly do "justice to Stella" as far as lay in his power.

When he had got to this conclusion the bell rang sharply, and, alas! Dr. Burnet, who had calculated on going to bed for once in comfort and quiet, had to face the wintry world again and go out into the snow.

CHAPTER XXVII.

KATHERINE'S life at Sliplin was in no small degree affected by the result of the Rector's unfortunate visit. How its termination became known nobody could tell. No one ventured to say "She told me herself," still less, "He told me." Yet everybody knew. There were some who had upheld that the Rector had too much respect for himself ever to put himself in the position of being rejected by old Tredgold's daughter; but even these had to acknowledge that this overturn of everything seemly and correct had really happened. It was divined, perhaps, from Mr. Stanley's look, who went about the parish with his head held very high, and an air of injury which nobody had remarked in him before. For it was not only that he had been refused. That is a privilege which no law or authority can take from a free-born English girl, and far would it have been from the Rector's mind to deny to Katherine this right; but it was the manner in which it had been exercised which gave him so deep a wound. It was not as the father of Charlotte and Evelyn that Mr. Stanley had been in the habit of regarding himself, nor that he had been regarded. His own individuality was too remarkable and too attractive, he felt with all modesty, to lay him under such a risk; and yet here was a young woman in his own parish, in his own immediate circle, who regarded him from that point of view, and who looked upon his proposal as ridiculous and something like an insult to her youth. Had she said prettily that she did not feel herself good enough for such a position, that she was not worthy—but that she was aware of the high compliment he had paid her, and never would forget it—which was the thing that any woman with a due sense of fitness would have said,

he might have forgiven her. But Katherine's outburst of indignation, her anger to have been asked to be the stepmother of Charlotte and Evelyn her playfellows, her complete want of gratitude or of any sense of the honour done her, had inflicted a deep blow upon the Rector. That he should be scorned as a lover seemed to him impossible, that a woman should be so insensible to every fact of life. He did not get over it for a long time, nor am I sure that he ever did get over it; not the disappointment, which he bore like a man, but the sense of being scorned. So long as he lived he never forgave Katherine that insult to his dearest feelings.

And thus Katherine's small diversions were driven back into a still narrower circle. She could not go to the Rectory, where the girls were divided between gratitude to her for not having turned their life upside down, and wrath against her for not having appreciated papa; nor could she go where she was sure to meet him, and to catch his look of offended pride and wounded dignity. It made her way very hard for her to have to think and consider, and even make furtive enquiries whether the Stanleys would be there before going to the mildest tea party. When Mrs. Shanks invited her to meet Miss Mildmay, she was indeed safe. Yet even there Mr. Stanley might come in to pay these ladies a call, or Charlotte appear with her portfolio of drawings, or Evelyn fly in for a moment on her way to the post. She went even to that very mild entertainment with a quiver of anxiety. The great snowstorm was over which had stopped everything, obliterating all the roads, and making the doctor's dog-cart and the butcher's and baker's carts the only vehicles visible about the country—which lay in one great white sheet, the brilliancy of which made the sea look muddy where it came up with a dull colour upon the beach. Everything, indeed, looked dark in comparison with that dazzling cloak of snow, until by miserable human usage the dazzling white changed into that most squalid of all squalid things, the remnant of a snowstorm in England, drabbed by all kinds of droppings, powdered with dust of smoke and coal, churned into the chilliest and most dreadful

of mud. The island had passed through that horrible phase after a brief delicious ecstasy of skating, from which poor Katherine was shut out by the same reasons already given, but now had emerged green and fresh, though cold, with a sense of thankfulness which the fields seemed to feel, and the birds proclaimed better and more than the best of the human inhabitants could do.

The terrace gardens of Mrs. Shanks and Miss Mildmay shone with this refreshed and brightened greenness, and the prospect from under the verandah of their little houses was restored to its natural colour. The sea became once more the highest light in the landscape, the further cliffs were brown, the trees showed a faint bloom of pushing buds and rising sap, and glowed in the light of the afternoon sun near its setting. Mrs. Shanks' little drawing room was a good deal darkened by its little verandah, but when the western sun shone in, as it was doing, the shade of the little green roof was an advantage even in winter; and it was so mild after the snow that the window was open, and a thrush in a neighbouring shrubbery had begun to perform a solo among the bushes, exactly, as Mrs. Shanks said, like a fine singer invited for the entertainment of the guests.

"It isn't often you hear a roudie like that," she said. "I consider Miss Sherlock was nothing to it." Miss Sherlock was a professional lady who had been paying a visit in Sliplin, and who at afternoon teas and evening parties, being very kind and ready to "oblige," had turned the season into a musical one, and provided for the people who were so kind as to invite her, an entertainment almost as cheap as that of the thrush in Major Toogood's shrubbery.

"I hope the poor thing has some crumbs," said Miss Mildmay. "I always took great pains to see that there was plenty of bread well peppered put out for them during the snow."

"Was Miss Sherlock so very good?" said Katherine. "I was unfortunate, I never heard her, even at her concert. Oh, yes, I had tickets—but I did not go."

"That is just what we want to talk to you about, my dear

Katherine. Fancy a great singer in Sliplin, and the Cliff not represented, not a soul there. Oh, if poor dear Stella had but been here, she would not have stayed away when there was anything to see or hear."

"Yes, I am a poor creature in comparison," said Katherine, "but you know it isn't nice to go to such places alone."

"If there was any need to go alone! You know we would have called for you in the midge any time; but that's ridiculous for you with all your carriages; it would have been more appropriate for you to call for us. Another time, Katherine, my dear——"

"Oh, I know how kind you are; it was not precisely for want of some one to go with."

"Jane Shanks," said Miss Mildmay, "what is the use of pretences between us who have known the child all her life? It is very well understood in Sliplin, Katherine, that there must be some motive in your seclusion. You have some reason, you cannot conceal it from us who know you, for shutting yourself up as you do."

"What reason? Is it not a good enough reason that I am alone now, and that to be reminded of it at every moment is—oh, it is hard," said Katherine, tears coming into her eyes. "It is almost more than I can bear."

"Dear child!" Mrs. Shanks said, patting her hand which rested on the table. "We shouldn't worry her with questions, should we?" But there was no conviction in her tone, and Katherine, though her self-pity was quite strong enough to bring that harmless water to her eyes, was quite aware not only that she did not seclude herself because of Stella, but also that her friends were not in the least deceived.

"I ask no questions," said Miss Mildmay, "I hope I have a head on my shoulders and a couple of eyes in it. I don't require information from Katherine! What I've got to say is that she mustn't do it. Most girls think very little of refusing a man; sometimes they continue good friends, sometimes they don't. When a man sulks it shows he was much in earnest, and is really a compliment. But to stay at home morning and

night because there is a man in the town who is furious with you for not marrying him; why, that's a thing that is not to be allowed to go on, not for a day——"

"Nobody has any right to say that there is any man whom——"

"Oh, don't redden up, Katherine, and flash your eyes at me! I have known you since you were *that* high, and I don't care a brass button what you say. Do you think I don't know all about you, my dear? Do you think that there's a thing in Sliplin which I don't know or Jane Shanks doesn't know? Bless us, what is the good of us, two old cats, as I know you call us——"

"Miss Mildmay!" cried Katherine; but as it was perfectly true, she stopped there and had not another word to say.

"Yes, that's my name, and *her* name is Mrs. Shanks; but that makes no difference. We are the two old cats. I have no doubt it was to Stella we owed the title, and I don't bear her any malice nor you either. Neither does Jane Shanks. We like you, on the contrary, my dear; but if you think you can throw dust in our eyes—— Why, there is the Rector's voice through the partition asking for me."

"Oh," said Katherine, "I must go, really I must go: this is the time when papa likes me to go to him. I have stayed too long, I really, really must go now——"

"Sit down, sit down, dear. It is only her fun. There is nobody speaking through the partition. The idea! Sliplin houses are not very well built, but I hope they are better than that."

"I must have been mistaken," said Miss Mildmay grimly. "I believe after all it is only Jane Shanks' boy; he has a very gruff manly voice, though he is such a little thing, and a man's voice is such a rarity in these parts that he deceives me. Well, Katherine, the two old cats hear everything. If it does not come to me it comes to *her*. My eyes are the sharpest, I think, but she hears the best. You can't take us in. We know pretty well all that has happened to you, though you

have been so very quiet about it. There was that young city man whom you wouldn't have, and I applaud you for it. But he'll make a match with somebody of much more consequence than you. And then there is poor Mr. Stanley. The Stanleys are as thankful to you as they can be, and well they may. Why, it would have turned the whole place upside down. A young very rich wife at the Rectory and the poor girls turned out of doors. It just shows how little religion does for some people."

"Oh, stop! stop!" cried Mrs. Shanks. "What has his religion to do with it? It's not against any man's religion to fall in love with a nice girl."

"Please don't say any more on this subject," cried Katherine; "if you think it's a compliment to me to be fallen in love with—by an old gentleman!—— But I never said a word about the Rector. It is all one of your mistakes. You do make mistakes sometimes, Miss Mildmay. You took little Bobby's voice for—a clergyman's." It gave more form to the comparison to say a clergyman than merely a man.

"So I did," said Miss Mildmay, "that will always be remembered against me; but you are not going to escape, Katherine Tredgold, in that way. I shall go to your father, if you don't mind, and tell him everything, and that you are shutting yourself up and seeing nobody, because of—— Well, if it is not because of that, what is it? It is not becoming, it is scarcely decent that a girl of your age should live so much alone."

"Please let me go, Mrs. Shanks," said Katherine. "Why should you upbraid me? I do the best I can; it is not my fault if there is nobody to stand by me."

"We shall all stand by you, my dear," said Mrs. Shanks, following her to the door, "and Ruth Mildmay is never so cross as she seems. We will stand by you, in the midge or otherwise, wherever you want to go. At all times you may be sure of us, Katherine, either Ruth Mildmay or me."

But when the door was closed upon Katherine Mrs. Shanks rushed back to the little drawing-room, now just sinking into

greyness, the last ray of the sunset gone. "You see," she cried, "it's all right, I to——"

But she was forestalled with a louder "I told you so!" from Miss Mildmay; "didn't I always say it?" that lady concluded triumphantly. Mrs. Shanks might begin the first, but it was always her friend who secured the last word.

Katherine walked out into the still evening air, a little irritated, a little disgusted, and a little amused by the offer of these two chaperons and the midge to take her about. She had to walk through the High Street of Sliplin, and everybody was out at that hour. She passed Charlotte Stanley with her portfolio under her arm, who would probably have rushed to her and demanded a glance at the sketches even in the open road, or that Katherine should go in with her to the stationer's to examine them at her ease on the counter; but who passed now with an awkward bow, having half crossed the road to get out of her way, yet sending a wistful smile nevertheless across what she herself would have called the middle distance. "Now what have I done to Charlotte?" Katherine said to herself. If there was anyone who ought to applaud her, who ought to be grateful to her, it was the Rector's daughters. She went on with a sort of rueful smile on her lips, and came up without observing it to the big old landau, in which was seated Lady Jane. Katherine was hurrying past with a bow, when she was suddenly greeted from that unexpected quarter with a cry of "Katherine! where are you going so fast?" which brought her reluctantly back.

"My dear Katherine! what a long time it is since we have met," said Lady Jane.

"Yes," said Katherine sedately. "That is very true, it is a long time."

"You mean to say it is my fault by that tone! My dear, you have more horses and carriages, and a great deal more time and youth and all that than I. Why didn't you come to see me? If you thought I was huffy or neglectful, why didn't you come and tell me so? I should have thought that was the right thing to do."

"I should not have thought it becoming," cried Katherine, astonished by this accost, "from me to you. I am the youngest and far the humblest——"

"Oh, fiddlesticks!" cried the elder lady, "that's not true humility, that's pride, my dear. I was an old friend; and though poor dear Stella always put herself in the front, you know it was you I liked best, Katherine. Well, when will you come, now? Come and spend a day or two, which will be extremely dull, for we're all alone; but you can tell me of Stella, as well as your own little affairs."

"I don't know that I can leave papa," Katherine said, with a little remnant of that primness which had been her distinction in Captain Scott's eyes.

"Nonsense! He will spare you to me," said Lady Jane with calm certainty. "Let me see, what day is this, Tuesday? Then I will come for you on Saturday. You can send over that famous little brougham with your maid and your things, and keep it if you like, for we have scarcely anything but dog-carts, except this hearse. Saturday; and don't show bad breeding by making any fuss about it," Lady Jane said.

Katherine felt that the great lady was right, it would have been bad breeding; and then her heart rose a little in spite of herself at the thought of the large dull rooms at Steephill in which there was no gilding, nor any attempt to look finer than the most solid needs of life demanded, and where Lady Jane conducted the affairs of life with a much higher hand than any of the Sliplin ladies. After being so long shut up in Sliplin, and now partly out of favour in it, the ways of Lady Jane seemed bigger, the life more easy and less self-conscious, and she consented with a little rising of her heart. She was a little surprised that Lady Jane, with her large voice, should have shouted a cordial greeting to the doctor as he passed in his dog-cart. "I am going to write to you," she cried, nodding her head at him; but no doubt this was about some little ailment in the nursery, for with Katherine, a young lady going on a visit to Steephill, what could it have to do?

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE doctor had made himself a very important feature in Katherine's life during those dull winter days. After the great snowstorm, which was a thing by which events were dated for long after, in the island, and which was almost coincident with the catastrophe of the Rector; he had become more frequent in his visits to Mr. Tredgold and consequently to the tea-table of Mr. Tredgold's lonely daughter. While the snow lasted, and all the atmospheric influences were at their worst, it stood to reason that an asthmatical, rheumatical, gouty old man wanted more looking after than usual; and it was equally clear that a girl a little out of temper and out of patience with life, who was disposed to shut herself up and retire from the usual amusements of her kind, would also be much the better for the invasion into her closed-up world of life and fresh air in the shape of a vigorous and personable young man, who, if not perhaps so secure in self-confidence and belief in his own fascinations as the handsome (if a little elderly) Rector, had not generally been discouraged by the impression he knew himself to have made. And Katherine had liked those visits, that was undeniable; the expectation of making a cup of tea for the doctor had been pleasant to her. The thought of his white strong teeth and the bread and butter which she never got out of her mind, was now amusing, not painful; she had seen him so often making short work of the little thin slices provided for her own entertainment. And he told her all that was going on, and gave her pieces of advice which his profession warranted. He got to know more of her tastes, and she more of his in this way, than perhaps was the case with any two young people in the entire island, and this in the most simple, the

most natural way. If there began to get a whisper into the air of Dr. Burnet's devotion to his patient on the Cliff and its possible consequences, that was chiefly because the doctor's inclinations had been suspected before by an observant public. And indeed the episode of the Rector had afforded it too much entertainment to leave the mind of Sliplin free for further remark in respect to Katherine and her proceedings. And Mr. Tredgold's asthma accounted for everything in those more frequent visits to the Cliff. All the same, it was impossible that there should not be a degree of pleasant intimacy and much self-revelation on both sides during these half hours, when, wrapped in warmth and comfort and sweet society, Dr. Burnet saw his dog-cart promenading outside in the snow or during the deeper miseries of the thaw, with the contrast which enhances present pleasure. He became himself more and more interested in Katherine, his feelings towards her being quite genuine, though perhaps enlivened by her prospects as an heiress. And if there had not been that vague preoccupation in Katherine's mind concerning James Stanford, the recollection not so much of him as of the many, many times she had thought of him, I think it very probable indeed that she would have fallen in love with the doctor; indeed, there were moments when his image pushed Stanford very close, almost making that misty hero give way. He was a very misty hero, a shadow, an outline, indefinite, never having given much revelation of himself; and Dr. Burnet was very definite, as clear as daylight, and in many respects as satisfactory. It would have been very natural indeed that the one should have effaced the other.

Dr. Burnet did not know anything of James Stanford. He thought of Katherine as a little shy, a little cold, perhaps from the persistent shade into which she had been cast by her sister, unsusceptible as people say; but he did not at all despair of moving her out of that calm. He had thought indeed that there were indications of the internal frost yielding, before his interview with Lady Jane. With Lady Jane's help he thought there was little doubt of success. But even that security made him cautious. It was evident that she was a girl

with whom one must not attempt to go too fast. The Rector had tried to carry the fort by a *coup de main*, and he had perished ingloriously in the effort. Dr. Burnet drew himself in a little after he acquired the knowledge of that event, determined not to risk the same fate. He had continued his visits but he had been careful to give them the most friendly, the least lover-like aspect, to arouse no alarms. When he received the salutation of Lady Jane in passing, and her promise that he should hear from her, his sober heart gave a bound, which was reflected unconsciously in the start of the mare making a dash forward by means of some magnetism, it is to be supposed conveyed to her by the reins from her master's hand—so that he had to exert himself suddenly with hand and whip to reduce her to her ordinary pace again. If the manoeuvre had been intentional it would have been clever as showing his skill and coolness in the sight of his love and of his patroness. It had the same effect not being intentional at all.

I am not sure either whether it was Lady Jane's intention to enhance the effect of Dr. Burnet by the extreme dulness of the household background upon which she set him, so to speak, to impress the mind of Katherine. There was no party at Steephill. Sir John, though everything that was good and kind, was dull; the tutor, who was a young man fresh from the University, and no doubt might have been very intellectual or very frivolous had there been anything to call either gifts out, was dull also because of having little encouragement to be anything else. Lady Jane indeed was not dull, but she had no call upon her for any exertion; and the tone of the house was humdrum beyond description. The old clergyman dined habitually at Steephill on the Sunday evenings, and he was duller still, though invested to Katherine with a little interest as the man who had officiated at her sister's marriage. But he could not be got to recall the circumstance distinctly, nor to master the fact that this Miss Tredgold was so closely related to the young lady whom he had made into Lady Somers. "Dear! dear! to think of that!" he had said when the connection had been explained to him, but what he meant

by that exclamation nobody knew. I think it very likely that Lady Jane herself was not aware how dull her house was when in entire repose, until she found it out by looking through the eyes of a chance guest like Katherine. "What in thunder did you mean by bringing that poor girl here to bore her to death, when there's nobody in the house?" Sir John said, whose voice was like a westerly gale. "Really, Katherine, I did not remember how deadly dull we were," Lady Jane said apologetically. "It suits us well enough—Sir John and myself; but it's a shame to have asked you here when there's nobody in the house, as he says. And Sunday is the worst of all, when you can't have even your needlework to amuse you. But there are some people coming to dinner to-morrow." Katherine did her best to express herself prettily, and I don't think even that she felt the dulness so much as she was supposed to do. The routine of a big family house, the machinery of meals and walks and drives and other observances, the children bursting in now and then, the tutor appearing from time to time tremendously *comme il faut*, and keeping up his equality, Sir John, not half so careful, rolling in from the inspection of his stables or his turnips with a noisy salutation, "You come out with me after lunch, Miss Tredgold, and get a blow over the downs, far better for you than keeping indoors." And then after that blow on the downs, afternoon tea, and Mr. Montgomery rubbing his hands before the fire, while he asked, without moving, whether he should hand the kettle. All this was mildly amusing, in the proportion of its dulness, for a little while. We none of us, or at least few of us, feel heavily this dull procession of the hours when it is our own life; when it is another's, our perceptions are more clear.

"But there are people coming to dinner to-morrow," Lady Jane said. There was something in the little nod she gave, of satisfaction and knowingness, which Katherine did not understand or attempt to understand. No idea of Dr. Burnet was associated with Stepphill. She was not aware that he was on visiting terms there—he had told her that he attended the servants' hall—so that it was with a little start of surprise that,

raising her eyes from a book she was looking at, she found him standing before her, holding out his hand as the guests gathered before dinner. The party was from the neighbourhood—county, or, at least, country people—and when Dr. Burnet was appointed to take Katherine in to dinner, that young lady, though she knew the doctor so well and liked him so much, did not feel that it was any great promotion. She thought she might have had somebody newer, something that belonged less to her own routine of existence, which is one of the mistakes often made by very astute women of the world like Lady Jane. There was young Fortescue, for instance, a mere fox-hunting young squire, not half so agreeable as Dr. Burnet, whom Katherine would have preferred. "He is an ass; he would not amuse her in the very least," Lady Jane had said. But Sir John, who was not clever at all, divined that something new, though an ass, would have amused Katherine more. Besides, Lady Jane had her motives, which she mentioned to nobody.

Dr. Burnet did the very best for himself that was possible. He gave Katherine a report of her father, he told her the last thing that had transpired at Sliplin since her departure, he informed her who all the people were at table, pleased to let her see that he knew them all. "That's young Fortescue who has just come in to his estate; and he promises to make ducks and drakes of it," Dr. Burnet said. Katherine looked across the table at the young man thus described. She was not responsible for him in any way, nor could it concern her if he did make ducks and drakes of his estate, but she would have preferred to make acquaintance with those specimens of the absolutely unknown. A little feeling suddenly sprang up in her heart against Dr. Burnet, because he was Dr. Burnet and absolutely above reproach. She would have sighed for Dr. Burnet, for his quick understanding and the abundance he had to say, had she been seated at young Fortescue's side.

After dinner, when she had talked a little to all the ladies and had done her duty, Lady Jane caught Katherine's hand and drew her to a seat beside herself, and then she beckoned

to Dr. Burnet, who drew a chair in front of them and sat down, bending forward till his head, Katherine thought, was almost in Lady Jane's lap. "I want," she said, "Katherine, to get Dr. Burnet on our side—to make him take up our dear Stella's interests as you do, my dear, and as in my uninfluential way I should like to do too."

"How can Dr. Burnet take up Stella's interests?" cried Katherine, surprised and perhaps a little offended too.

"My dear Katherine, a medical man has the most tremendous opportunities—all that the priest had in old times, and something additional which belongs to himself. He can often say a word when none of the rest of us would dare to do so. I have immense trust in a medical man. He can bring people together that have quarrelled, and—and influence wills, and—do endless things. I always try to have the doctor on my side."

"Miss Katherine knows," said Dr. Burnet, trying to lead out of the subject, for Lady Jane's methods were entirely, on this occasion, too straightforward, "that the medical man in this case is always on her side. Does not Mrs. Swanson, Lady Jane, sing very well? I have never heard her. I am not very musical, but I love a song."

"Which is a sign that you are not musical. You are like Sir John," said Lady Jane, as if that was the worst that could be said. "Still, if that is what you mean, Dr. Burnet, you can go and ask her, on my part. He is very much interested in you all, I think, Katherine," she added when he had departed on this mission. "We had a talk the other day—about you and Stella and the whole matter. I think, if he ever had it in his power, that he would see justice done here, as you would yourself."

"He is very friendly, I daresay," said Katherine, "but I can't imagine how he could ever have anything in his power."

"There is no telling," Lady Jane said. "I think he is quite a disinterested man, if any such thing exists. Now, we must be silent a little, for, of course, Mrs. Swanson is going to sing; she is not likely to neglect an opportunity. She has a

good voice, so far as that goes, but little training. It is just the thing that pleases Sir John. And he has planted himself between us and the piano, bless him! now we can go on with our talk. Katherine, I don't think you see how important it is to surround your father with people who think the same as we do about your poor sister."

"No," said Katherine, "it has not occurred to me; my father is not very open to influence."

"Then do you give up Stella's cause? Do you really think it is hopeless, Katherine?"

"How could I think so?" cried the girl with a keen tone in her voice which, though she spoke low, was penetrating, and to check which, Lady Jane placed her hand on Katherine's hand and kept it there with a faint "shsh." "You know what I should instantly do," she added, "if I ever had it in my power."

"Dear Katherine! but your husband might not see it in that light."

"He should—or he should not be—my husband," said Katherine with a sudden blush. She raised her eyes unwillingly at this moment and caught the gaze of Dr. Burnet, who was standing behind the great bulk of Sir John, but with his face towards the ladies on the sofa. Katherine's heart gave a little bound, half of affright. She had looked at him and he at her as she said the words. An answering gleam of expression, an answering wave of colour, seemed to go over him (though he could not possibly hear her) as she spoke. It was the first time that this idea had been clearly suggested to her, but now so simply, so potently, as if she were herself the author of the suggestion. She was startled out of her self-possession. "Oh," she cried with agitation, "I like her voice! I am like Sir John; let us listen to the singing." Lady Jane nodded her head, pressed Katherine's hand, and did what was indeed the first wise step she had taken, stepped as noiselessly as possible to another corner, where, behind her fan, she could talk to a friend more likely to respond to her sentiments and left Dr. Burnet to take her place.

"Is this permitted? It is too tempting to be lost," he said in a whisper, and then he too relapsed into silence and attention. Katherine, I fear, did not get any clear impression of the song. Her own words went through her head, involuntarily, as though she had touched some spring which went on repeating them: "My husband—my husband." Her white dress touched his blackness as he sat down beside her. She drew away a little, her heart beating loudly, in alarm, mingled with some other feeling which she could not understand, but he did not say another word until the song was over, and all the applause, and the moment of commotion in which the singer returned to her seat, and the groups of the party changed and mingled. Then he said suddenly, "I hope you will not think, Miss Katherine, that I desired Lady Jane to drag me in head and shoulders to your family concerns. I never should have been so presumptuous. I do trust you will believe that."

"I never should have thought so, Dr. Burnet," said Katherine, faltering with that commotion which was she hoped entirely within herself and apparent to no one. Then she added as she assured her voice, "It would not have been presumptuous. You know so much of us already, and of *her*, and took so much part——"

"I am your faithful servant," he said, "ready to be sent on any errand, or to take any part you wish, but I do not presume further than that." Then he rose quickly, as one who is moved by a sudden impulse. "Miss Katherine, will you let me take you to the conservatory to see Lady Jane's great aloe? They used to say it blossomed only once in a hundred years."

"But that's all nonsense, you know," said Mr. Montgomery the tutor; "see them all about the Riviera at every corner. Truth, they kill 'emselfs when they're about it."

"Which comes to the same thing. Will you come?" said Dr. Burnet, offering his arm.

"But, my dear fellow, Miss Tredgold has seen it three or four times," said this very unnecessary commentator.

"Never mind. She has not seen what I am going to show her," said the doctor with great self-possession. Lady Jane followed them with her eyes as they went away into the long conservatory, which was famous in the islands and full of lofty palms and tropical foliage. Her middle-aged bosom owned a little tremor; was he going to put it to her, then and there? Lady Jane had offered assistance, even co-operation, but this prompt action took away her breath.

"I should like to see the alog, too," said the lady by her side.

"So you shall, presently," said Lady Jane, "but we must not make a move yet, for there is Lady Freshwater going to sing. Mr. Montgomery, ask Lady Freshwater from me whether she will not sing us one of her delightful French songs. She has such expression, and they are all as light as air—of course, not serious music. Look at Sir John, he is pleased, but he likes it better when it is English, and he can make out the words. He is a constant amusement when he talks of music—and he thinks he understands it, poor dear."

She kept talking until she had watched Lady Freshwater to the piano, and heard her begin. And then Lady Jane felt herself entitled to a little rest. She kept one eye on the conservatory to see that nobody interrupted the botanical exposition which was no doubt going on there. Would he actually propose—on the spot, all at once, with the very sound of the conversation and of Lady Freshwater's song in their ears? Was it possible that a man should go so fast as that? Now that it had come to this point Lady Jane began to get a little compunctious, to ask herself whether she might not have done better for Katherine than a country doctor, without distinction, even though he might have a wealthy uncle and a family place at his back? Old Tredgold's daughter was perhaps too great a prize to be allowed to drop in that commonplace way. On the other hand, if Lady Jane had exerted herself to get Katherine a better match, was it likely that a man—if a man of our *monde*—would have consented to such an arrangement about Stella as Dr. Burnet was willing to make? If the fort-

une had been Stella's, Lady Jane was quite certain that Charlie Somers would have consented to no such settlement. And after all, would not Katherine be really happier with a man not too much out of her own *monde*, fitted for village life, knowing all about her, and not likely to be ashamed of his father-in-law? With this last argument she comforted her heart.

And Katherine went into the conservatory to see the aloe, which that malevolent tutor declared she had already seen so often, with her heart beating rather uncomfortably, and her hand upon Dr. Burnet's arm.

CHAPTER XXIX.

BUT though Lady Jane had so fully made up her mind to it, and awaited the result with so much excitement, and though Katherine herself was thrilled with an uneasy consciousness, and Dr. Burnet's looks gave every sanction to the idea, he did not on that evening under the tall aloe, which had begun to burst the innumerable wrappings of its husk, in the Steephill conservatory, declare his love or ask Katherine to be his wife. I cannot tell the reason why—I think there came over him a chill alarm as to how he should get back if by any accident his suit was unsuccessful. It was like the position which gave Mr. Puff so much trouble in the *Critic*. He could not "exit praying." How was he to get off the stage? He caught the eyes of an old lady who was seated near the conservatory door. They were dull eyes, with little speculation in them, but they gave a faint glare as the two young people passed; and the doctor asked himself with a shudder, How could he meet their look when he came back if——? How indeed could he meet anybody's look—Lady Jane's, who was his accomplice, and who would be very severe upon him if he did not succeed, and jolly Sir John's, who would slap him on the shoulder and shout at him in his big voice? His heart sank to his boots when he found himself alone with the object of his affections amid the rustling palms. He murmured something hurriedly about something he wanted to say to her, but could not here, where they were liable to interruption at any moment, and then he burst into a display of information about the aloe which was very astounding to Katherine. She listened, feeling the occasion *manqué*, with a sensation of relief. I think it quite probable that in the circumstances, and amid the tremor

of sympathetic excitement derived from Lady Jane, and the general tendency of the atmosphere, Katherine might have accepted Dr. Burnet. She would probably have been sorry afterwards, and in all probability it would have led to no results, but I think she would have accepted him that evening had he had the courage to put it to the touch; and he, for his part, would certainly have done it had he not been seized with that tremor as to how he was to get off the stage.

He found it very difficult to explain this behaviour to Lady Jane afterwards, who, though she did not actually ask the question, pressed him considerably about the botanical lecture he had been giving.

"I have sat through a French *café chantant* song in your interests, with all the airs and graces," she said with a look of disgust, "to give you time."

"Yes, I know," said Dr. Burnet—it was at the moment of taking his leave, and he knew that he must soon escape, which gave him a little courage—"you have done everything for me—you have been more than kind, Lady Jane."

"But if it is all to come to nothing, after I had taken the trouble to arrange everything for you!"

"It was too abrupt," he said, "and I finked it at the last. How was I to get back under everybody's eyes if it had not come off?"

"It would have come off," she said hurriedly, under her breath, with a glance at Katherine. Then, in her usual very audible voice, she said, "Must you go so early, Dr. Burnet? Then good-night; and if your mare is fresh take care of the turning at Eversfield Green."

He did not know what this warning meant, and neither I believe did she, though it was a nasty turning. And then he drove away into the winter night, with a sense of having failed, failed to himself and his own expectations, as well as to Lady Jane's. He had not certainly intended to take any decisive step when he drove to Steephill, but yet he felt when he left it that the occasion was *manqué*, and that he had perhaps risked everything by his lack of courage. This is not a pleasant

thought to a man who is not generally at a loss in any circumstances, and whose ways have generally, on the whole, been prosperous and successful. He was a fool not to have put it to the touch, to be frightened by an old lady's dull eyes which probably would have noticed nothing, or the stare of the company which was occupied by its own affairs and need not have suspected even that his were at a critical point. Had he been a little bolder he might have been carrying home with him a certainty which would have kept him warmer than any great-coat; but then, on the other hand, he might have been departing shamed and cast down, followed by the mocking glances of that assembly, and with Rumour following after him as it followed the exit of the Rector, breathing among all the gossips that he had been rejected; upon which he congratulated himself that he had been prudent, that he had not exposed himself at least so far. Finally he began to wonder, with a secret smile of superiority, how the Rector had got off the scene? Did he "exit praying"?—which would at least have been suitable to his profession. The doctor smiled grimly under his muffler; he would have laughed if it had not been for Jim by his side, who sat thinking of nothing, looking out for the Sliplin lights and that turning about which Lady Jane had warned his master. If it had not been for Jim, indeed, Dr. Burnet, though so good a driver, would have run the mare into the bank of stones and roadmakers' materials which had been accumulated there for the repair of the road. "Exit praying"?—no, the Rector, to judge from his present aspect of irritated and wounded pride, could not have done that. "Exit cursing," would have been more like it. The doctor did burst into a little laugh as he successfully steered round the Eversfield corner, thanks to the observation of his groom, and Jim thought this was the reason of the laugh. At all events, neither the praying nor the cursing had come yet for Dr. Burnet, and he was not in any hurry. He said to himself that he would go and pay old Tredgold a visit next morning, and tell him of the dinner party at Steephill and see how the land lay.

I cannot tell whether Mr. Tredgold had any suspicion of the motives which made his medical man so very attentive to him, but he was always glad to see the doctor, who amused him, and whose vigorous life and occupation it did the old gentleman good to see.

"Ah, doctor, you remind me of what I was when I was a young man—always at it night and day. I didn't care not a ha'penny for pleasure; work was pleasure for me—and makin' money," said the old man with a chuckle and a slap on the pocket where, metaphorically, it was all stored.

"You had the advantage over me, then," the doctor said.

"Why, you fellows must be coining money," cried the patient; "a golden guinea for five minutes' talk; rich as Creosote you doctors ought to grow—once you get to the top of the tree. Must be at the top o' the tree first, I'll allow—known on 'Change, you know, and that sort of thing. You should go in for royalties, doctor; that's the way to get known."

"I should have no objection, Mr. Tredgold, you may be sure, if the royalties would go in for me; but there are two to be taken into account in such a bargain."

"Oh, that's easily done," said the old man. "Stand by when there's some accident, doctor—there's always accidents; and be on the spot at the proper time."

"Unless I were to hire someone to get up the accident—Would you go so far as to recommend that?"

Old Tredgold laughed and resumed the former subject. "So you took my Katie in to dinner? Well, I'm glad of that. I don't approve of young prodigals dangling about my girls; they may save themselves the trouble. I've let 'em know my principles, I hope, strong enough. If I would not give in to my little Stella, it stands to reason I won't for Kate. So my Lady Jane had best keep her fine gentlemen to herself."

"You may make your mind quite easy, sir," said the doctor; "there were nothing but county people, and very heavy county people into the bargain."

"County or town, I don't think much of 'em," said old Tredgold; "not unless they can table their money alongside of me; that's my principle, Dr. Burnet—pound for pound, or you don't get a daughter of mine. It's the only safe principle. Girls are chiefly fools about money; though Stella wasn't, mind you—that girl was always a chip o' the old block. Led astray, she was, by not believing I meant what I said—thought she could turn me round her little finger. That's what they all think," he said with a chuckle, "till they try—till they try."

"You see it is difficult to know until they do try," said Dr. Burnet; "and if you will excuse me saying it, Mr. Tredgold, Miss Stella had every reason to think she could turn you round her little finger. She had only to express a wish——"

"I don't deny it," said the old man with another chuckle—"I don't deny it. Everything they like—until they come to separatin' me from my money. I'll spend on them as much as any man; but when it comes to settlin', pound by pound—you've heard it before."

"Oh yes, I've heard it before," the doctor said with a half groan, "and I suppose there are very few men under the circumstances——"

"Plenty of men! Why there's young Fred Turney—fine young fellow—as flashy as you like with his rings and his pins, good cricketer and all that, though I think it's nonsense, and keeps a young fellow off his business. Why, twice the man that Somers fellow was! Had him down for Stella to look at, and she as good as turned him out of the house. Oh, she was an impudent one! Came down again the other day, on spec, looking after Katie; and bless you, she's just as bad, hankering after them military swells, too, without a copper. I'm glad to know my Lady Jane understands what's what and kept her out of their way."

"There were only county people—young Fortescue, who has a pretty estate, and myself."

"Oh, *you* don't count," said old Mr. Tredgold; "we

needn't reckon you. Young Fortescue, eh? All land, no money. Land's a very bad investment in these days. I think I'll have nothing to do with young Fortescue. Far safer money on the table; then you run no risks."

"Young Fortescue is not a candidate, I believe," said Dr. Burnet with a smile much against the grain.

"A candidate for what?—the county? I don't take any interest in politics except when they affect the market. Candidate, bless you, they're all candidates for a rich girl! There's not one of 'em, young or old, but thinks 'That girl will have a lot money.' Why, they tell me old Stanley—old enough to be her father—has been after Katie, old fool!" the old man said.

Dr. Burnet felt himself a little out of countenance. He said, "I do not believe, sir, for a moment, that the Rector, if there is any truth in the rumour, was thinking of Miss Katherine's money."

"Oh, tell that to the—moon, doctor! I know a little better than that. Her money? why it's her money everybody is thinking of. D'ye think my Lady Jane would pay her such attention if it wasn't for her money? I thought it was all broken off along of Stella, but she thinks better luck next time, I suppose. By George!" cried the old man, smiting the table with his fist, "if she brings another young rake to me, and thinks she'll get over me—By George, doctor! I've left Stella to taste how she likes it, but I'd turn the other one—that little white proud Katie—out of my house." There was a moment during which the doctor held himself ready for every emergency, for old Tredgold's countenance was crimson and his eyes staring. He calmed down, however, quickly, having learned the lesson that agitation was dangerous for his health, and with a softened voice said, "You, now, doctor, why don't you get married? Always better for a doctor to be married. The ladies like it, and you'd get on twice as well with a nice wife."

"Probably I should," said Dr. Burnet, "but perhaps, if the lady happened to have any money——"

"Don't take one without," the old man interrupted.

"I should be considered a fortune-hunter, and I shouldn't like that."

"Oh, you!" said Mr. Tredgold, "you don't count—that's another pair of shoes altogether. As for your young Fortescue, I should just like to see him fork out, down upon the table, thousand for thousand. If he can do that, he's the man for me."

"You don't count!" What did the old beggar mean by that?" Dr. Burnet asked himself as he took the reins out of Jim's hand and drove away. Was it contempt, meaning that the doctor was totally out of the question? or was it by any possibility an encouragement with the signification that he as a privileged person might be permitted to come in on different grounds? In another man's case Dr. Burnet would have rejected the latter hypothesis with scorn, but in his own he was not so sure. What was the meaning of that sudden softening of tone, the suggestion, "You, now, doctor, why don't you get married?" almost in the same breath with his denunciation of any imaginary pretender? Why was he (Burnet) so distinctly put in a different category? He rejected the idea that this could mean anything favourable to himself, and then he took it back again and caressed it, and began to think it possible. *You don't count.* Why shouldn't he count? *He* was not a spendthrift like Charlie Somers; *he* was not all but bankrupt; on the contrary, he was well-to-do and had expectations. He was in a better position than the young military swells whom Mr. Tredgold denounced; he was far better off than the Rector. Why shouldn't he count? unless it was meant that the rule about those pounds on the table, &c., did not count where he was concerned, that he was to be reckoned with from a different point of view. The reader may think this was great folly on Dr. Burnet's part, but when you turn over anything a hundred times in your mind it is sure to take new aspects not seen at first. And then Mr. Tredgold's words appeared to the doctor's intelligence quite capable of a special interpretation. He was, as a matter of fact,

a much more important person to Mr. Tredgold than any fashionable young swell who might demand Katherine in marriage. He, the doctor, held in his hands, in a measure, the thread of life and death. Old Tredgold's life had not a very enjoyable aspect to the rest of the world, but he liked it, and did not want it to be shortened by a day. And the doctor had great power over that. The old man believed in him thoroughly—almost believed that so long as he was there there was no reason why he should die. Was not that an excellent reason for almost believing, certainly for allowing, that he might want to make so important a person a member of his family on terms very different from those which applied to other people, who could have no effect upon his life and comfort at all? "You don't count!" Dr. Burnet had quite convinced himself that this really meant all that he could wish it to mean before he returned from his morning round. He took up the question *à plusieurs reprises*; after every visit working out again and again the same line of argument: *You don't count*; I look to you to keep me in health, to prolong my life, to relieve me when I am in any pain, and build me up when I get low, as you have done for all these years; you don't count as the strangers do, you have something to put down on the table opposite my gold—your skill, your science, your art of prolonging life. To a man like you things are dealt out by another measure. Was it very foolish, very ridiculous, almost childish of Dr. Burnet? Perhaps it was, but he did not see it in that light.

He passed the Rector as he returned home, very late for his hurried luncheon as doctors usually are, and he smiled with a mixed sense of ridicule and compassion at the handsome clergyman, who had not yet recovered his complacency or got over that rending asunder of his *amour propre*. Poor old fellow! But it was very absurd of him to think that Katherine would have anything to say to him with his grown-up children. And a little while after, as he drove through the High Street, he saw young Fortescue driving into the stables at the Thatched House Hotel, evidently with the intention of putting up there.

"Ah!" he said to himself, "young Fortescue, another candidate!" The doctor was no wiser than other people, and did not consider that young Fortescue had been introduced for the first time to Katherine on the previous night, and could not possibly by any rule of likelihood be on his way to make proposals to her father the next morning. This dawned upon him after a while, and he laughed again aloud to the great disturbance of the mind of Jim, who could not understand why his master should laugh right out about nothing at all twice on successive days. Was it possible that much learning had made the doctor mad, or at least made him a little wrong in the head? And, indeed, excessive thinking on one subject has, we all know, a tendency that way.

CHAPTER XXX.

LADY JANE gave Katherine a great deal of good advice before she allowed her to return home. They talked much of Stella, as was natural, and of the dreadful discovery it was to her to find that after all she had no power over her father, and that she must remain in India with her husband for the sake of the mere living instead of returning home in triumph as she had hoped, and going to court and having the advantage at once of her little title and of her great fortune.

"The worst is that she seems to have given up hope," Lady Jane said. "I tell her that we all agreed we must give your father a year; but she has quite made up her mind that he never will relent at all."

"I am afraid I am of her opinion," said Katherine; "not while he lives. I hope indeed—that if he were ill—if he were afraid of—of anything happening——"

"And you, of course, would be there to keep him up in his good intentions, Katherine? Oh, don't lose an opportunity! And what a good thing for you to have a sensible understanding man like Dr. Burnet to stand by you. I am quite sure he will do everything he can to bring your father to a proper frame of mind."

"If he had anything to do with it!" said Katherine a little surprised.

"A doctor, my dear, has always a great deal to do with it. He takes the place that the priest used to take. The priest you need not send for unless you like, but the doctor you must have there. And I have known cases in which it made all the difference—with a good doctor who made a point of standing up for justice. Dr. Burnet is a man of

excellent character, not to speak of his feeling for you, which I hope is apparent enough."

"Lady Jane! I don't know what you mean."

"Well," said Lady Jane with composure, "there is no accounting for the opaqueness of girls in some circumstances. You probably did not remark either, Katherine, the infatuation of that unfortunate Rector, which you should have done, my dear, and stopped him before he came the length of a proposal, which is always humiliating to a man. But I was speaking of the doctor. He takes a great interest in poor Stella; he would always stand up for her in any circumstances, and you may find him of great use with your father at any—any crisis—which let us hope, however, will not occur for many a long year."

Lady Jane's prayer was not, perhaps, very sincere. That old Tredgold should continue to cumber the ground for many years, and keep poor Stella out of her money, was the very reverse of her desire; but the old man was a very tough old man, and she was afraid it was very likely that it would be so.

"I think," said Katherine with a little heat, "that it would be well that neither Dr. Burnet nor any other stranger should interfere."

"I did not say interfere," said Lady Jane; "everything of that kind should be done with delicacy. I only say that it will be a great thing for you to have a good kind man within reach in case of any emergency. Your father is, we all know, an old man, and one can never tell what may happen—though I think, for my part, that he is good for many years. Probably you will yourself be married long before that, which I will rejoice to see for my part. You have no relations to stand by you, no uncle, or anything of that sort? I thought not; then, my dear, I can only hope that you will find a good man——"

"Thank you for the good wish," said Katherine with a laugh. "I find it is a good man to look after Stella's interests rather than anything that will please me that my friends wish."

"My dear," said Lady Jane with a little severity, "I should not have expected such a speech from you. I have always

thought a good quiet man of high principles would be far more suitable for you than anything like Charlie Somers, for example. Charlie Somers is my own relation, but I'm bound to say that if I proposed to him to secure to his sister-in-law half of his wife's fortune I shouldn't expect a very gracious answer. These sort of men are always so hungry for money—they have such quantities of things to do with it. A plain man with fewer needs and more consideration for others—— Katherine, don't think me interested for Stella only. You know I like her, as well as feeling partly responsible; but you also know, my dear, that of the two I always preferred you."

"You are very kind," said Katherine; but she was not grateful—there was no *effusion* in her manner. Many girls would have thrown themselves upon Lady Jane's neck with an enthusiasm of response. But this did not occur to Katherine, nor did she feel the gratitude which she did not express.

"And I should like, I confess, to see you happily married, my dear," said Lady Jane impressively. "I don't think I know any girl whom I should be more glad to see settled; but don't turn away from an honest, plain man. That is the sort of man that suits a girl like *you* best. You are not a butterfly, and your husband shouldn't be of the butterfly kind. A butterfly man is a dreadful creature, Katherine, when he outgrows his season and gets old. There's Algy Scott, for example, my own cousin, who admired you very much—you would tire of him in a week, my dear, or any of his kind; they would bore you to death in ten days."

"I have no desire, Lady Jane, to try how long it would take to be bored to death by——"

"And you are very wise," Lady Jane said. "Come and let's look at the aloe and see how much it has unfolded since *that* night. And is it quite certain, Katherine, that you must go to-morrow? Well, you have had a very dull visit, and I have done nothing but bore you with my dull advice. But Sir John will be broken-hearted to lose you, and you will always find the warmest welcome at Steephill. Friends are friends, my dear, however dull they may be."

Katherine went home with her whole being in a state of animation, which is always a good thing for the mind even when it is produced by disagreeable events. The spirit of men, and naturally of women also, is apt to get stagnant in an undisturbed routine, and this had been happening to her day by day in the home life which so many things had concurred to make motionless. The loss of Stella, the double break with society, in the first place on that account, in the second because of the Rector, her partial separation from Steephill on one side and from the village on the other, had been, as it were, so many breakages of existence to Katherine, who had not sufficient initiative or sufficient position to make any centre for herself. Now the ice that had been gathered over her was broken in a multitude of pieces, if not very agreeably, yet with advantage to her mind. Katherine reflected with no small sense of contrariety and injustice of the continued comparison with Stella which apparently was to weigh down all her life. Lady Jane had invited her, not for her own attractiveness—though she did not doubt that Lady Jane's real sentiment at bottom was, as she said, one of partiality for Katherine—but to be put into the way she should go in respect to Stella and kept up to her duty. That Stella should not suffer, that she should eventually be secured in her fortune, that was the object of all her friends. It was because he would be favourable to Stella that Lady Jane had thrust Dr. Burnet upon her, indicating him almost by name, forcing her, as it were, into his arms. Did Dr. Burnet in the same way consider that he was acting in Stella's interests when he made himself agreeable to her sister? Katherine's heart—a little wounded, sore, mortified in pride and generosity (as if she required to be pushed on, to be excited and pricked up into action for Stella!)—seemed for a moment half disposed to throw itself on the other side, to call back the Rector, who would probably think it right that Stella should be punished for her disobedience, or to set up an immovable front as an unmarried woman, adopting that *rôle* which has become so common now-a-days. She would, she felt, have nobody recommended to her for her hus-

band whose chief characteristic was that he would take care of Stella. It was an insult to herself. She would marry nobody at second-hand on Stella's account. Better, far better, marry nobody at all, which was certainly her present inclination, and so be free to do for Stella, when the time came, what she had always intended, of her own accord and without intervention.

I think all the same that Lady Jane was quite right, and that the butterfly kind of man—the gallant, gay Algy or any of his fellows—would have been quite out of Katherine's way; also that a man like Dr. Burnet would have been much in her way. But to Katherine these calculations seemed all, more or less, insulting. Why an elderly clergyman with a grown-up family should suppose himself to be on an equality with her, a girl of twenty-three, and entitled to make her an offer, so very much at second-hand, of his heart and home, which was too full already; and why, in default of him, a country practitioner with no particular gifts or distinction should be considered the right thing for Katherine, gave her an angry sense of antagonism to the world. This, then, was all she was supposed to be good for—the humdrum country life, the humdrum, useful wife of such a man. And that everything that was pleasant and amusing and extravagant and brilliant should go to Stella: that was the award of the world. Katherine felt very angry as she drove home. She had no inclination towards any "military swell." She did not admire her brother-in-law nor his kind; she (on the whole) liked Dr. Burnet, and had a great respect for his profession and his much-occupied, laborious, honourable life. But to have herself set down beforehand as a fit mate only for the doctor or the clergyman, this was what annoyed the visionary young person, whose dreams had never been reduced to anything material, except perhaps that vague figure of James Stanford, who was nobody, and whom she scarcely knew!

Yet all this shaking up did Katherine good. If she had been more pleasantly moved she would perhaps scarcely have been so effectually startled out of the deadening routine of her life. The process was not pleasant at all, but it made her

blood course more quickly through her veins, and quickened her pulses and cleared her head. She was received by her father without much emotion—with the usual chuckle and “Here you are!” which was his most affectionate greeting.

“Well, so you’ve got home,” he said. “Find home more comfortable on the whole, eh, Katie? Better fires, better cooking, more light, eh? I thought you would. These grand folks, they have to save on something; here you’re stinted in nothing. Makes a difference, I can tell you, in life.”

“I don’t think there is much stinting in anything, papa, at Steephill.”

“Not for the dinner party, perhaps. I never hold with dinner parties. They don’t suit me; sitting down to a large meal when you ought to be thinking of your bed. But Sir John puts his best foot forward, eh, for that? Saves up the grapes, I shouldn’t wonder, till they go bad, for one blow-out, instead of eating ‘em when he wants ‘em, like we do, every day.”

This speech restored the equilibrium of Katherine’s mind by turning the balance of wit to the other side.

“You are not at all just to Sir John, papa. You never are when you don’t know people. He is very honest and kind, and takes very little trouble about his dinner parties. They were both very kind to me.”

“Asked young Fortescue to meet you, I hear. A young fellow with a lot of poor land and no money. Meaning to try me on another tack this time, I suppose. Not if he had a hundred miles of downs, Katie; you remember that. Land’s a confounded bad investment. None of your encumbered estates for me.”

“You need not distress yourself, papa. I never spoke to Mr. Fortescue,” said Katherine.

There was a little offence in her tone. She had not forgiven Lady Jane for the fact that Mr. Fortescue, the only young man of the party, had not been allotted to her for dinner, as she felt would have been the right thing. Katherine thought him very red in the face, weatherbeaten, and dull—

so far as appearances went; but she was piqued and offended at having been deprived of her rights. Did Lady Jane not think her good enough, *par exemple*, for young Fortescene? And her tone betrayed her, if Mr. Tredgold had taken any trouble to observe her tone.

"He need not come here to throw dust in my eyes—that's all," said the old man. "I want none of your landed fellows—beggars! with more to give out than they have coming in. No; the man that can put down his money on the table——"

"Don't you think I have heard enough of your money down on the table?" said Katherine, very red and uncomfortable. "No one is likely to trouble you about me, papa, so we may leave the money alone, on the table or off it."

"I'm not so sure about that. There's young Fred Turny would like nothing better. And a capital fellow that. Plenty of his own, and going into all the best society, and titled ladies flinging themselves at his head. Mind you, I don't know if you keep shilly-shallying, whether he'll stand it long—a young fellow like that."

"He knows very well there is no shilly-shallying about me," said Katherine.

And she left her father's room thinking within herself that though Lady Jane's way of recommending a plain man was not pleasant, yet the other way was worse. Fred Turny, it was certain, would not hear of dividing his wife's fortune with her sister, should her father's will give it all to herself; neither would Charlie Somers, Lady Jane assured her. Would Dr. Burnet do this? Katherine, possessed for the moment of a prejudice against the doctor, doubted, though that was the ground on which he was recommended. Would any man do so? There was one man she thought (of whom she knew nothing) who would; who cared nothing about the money; whose heart had chosen herself while Stella was there in all her superior attractions. Katherine felt that this man, of whom she had seen so little, who had been out of the country for nearly four years, from whom she had never received a

letter, and scarcely even could call to mind anything he had ever said to her, was the one man whom she could trust in all the world.

Dr. Burnet came that afternoon, as it was his usual day for visiting Mr. Tredgold. He was very particular in keeping to his days. It was a beautiful spring-like afternoon, and the borders round the house were full of crocuses, yellow and blue and white. The window was open in Katherine's corner, and all the landscape outside bright with the westering light.

"What a difference," he said, "from that snowstorm—do you remember the snowstorm? It is in this way an era for me—as, indeed, it was in the whole island. We all begin to date by it; before the snowstorm, or at the time of the snowstorm."

"I wonder," said Katherine, scarcely conscious of what she was saying, "why it was an era to you?"

"Ah, that I cannot tell you now. I will, perhaps, if you will let me, sometime. Come out and look at the crocuses. This is just the moment, before the sun goes down."

"Yes, they shut when the sun goes down," Katherine said, stepping out from the window.

The air had all the balm of spring, and the crocuses were all the colours of hope. It is delightful to come out of winter into the first gleam of the reviving year.

"We are nothing if not botanical," said the doctor. "You remember the albe. It is a fine thing but it is melancholy, for its blossoming is its death. It is like the old fable of the phoenix. When the new comes the old dies. And a very good thing too if we did not put our ridiculous human sentiment into everything."

"Do you think human sentiment is ridiculous?" said Katherine, half-disposed to back him up, half to argue it out.

"Of course I don't!" said the doctor with vehemence; and then he laughed and said, "We are talking like a book. But I am glad you went to Steepbill; there is not any such sentiment there."

"Do you think, then, I am liable to be attacked by fits of sentiment? I don't think so," she said, and then she invited the doctor to leave the crochets and to come in to tea.

I think it was that day that Dr. Burnet informed Katherine that her father had symptoms of illness more or less serious. He hoped that he might be able to stave off their development, and Mr. Tredgold might yet have many years of tolerable health before him. "But if I am right," he said, "I fear he will not have the calm life he has had. He will be likely to have sudden attacks, and suffer a good deal, from time to time. I will always be at hand, of course, and ready night and day. And, as I tell you, great alleviations are possible. I quite hope there will be many intervals of comfort. But, on the other hand, a catastrophe is equally possible. If he has any affairs to attend to, it would perhaps be—a good thing—if he could be persuaded to—look after them, as a matter of prudence, without giving him any alarm."

Such an intimation makes the heart beat of those to whom the angel of death is thus suddenly revealed hovering over their home; even when there is no special love or loss involved. The bond between Mr. Tredgold and his children was not very tender or delicate, and yet he was her father. Katherine's heart for a moment seemed to stand still. The colour went out of her face, and the eyes which she turned with an appealing gaze to the doctor filled with tears.

"Oh, Dr. Burnet!" she said.

"Don't be alarmed; there is nothing to call for any immediate apprehension. It is only if you want to procure any modification—any change in a will, or detail of that kind."

"You mean about Stella," she said. "I don't know what he has done about Stella; he never tells me anything. Is it necessary to trouble him, doctor? If he has not changed his will it will be all right; if he has destroyed it without making another it will still be all right, for some one told me that in that case we should share alike—is that the law? Then no harm can come to Stella. Oh, that we should be discussing in this calm way what might happen—after!" Two big

tears fell from Katherine's eyes. "If the worst were to happen even," she said; "if Stella were left out—it would still be all right, doctor, so long as I was there to see justice done."

"Dear Katherine!" he said, just touching her hand for a moment. She scarcely perceived in her agitation that he had left out the prefix, and the look which he gave her made no impression on her preoccupied mind. "You will remember," he said, "that I am to be called instantly if anything unusual happens, and that I shall always be ready—to do the best I can for him, and to stand by you—to the end."

CHAPTER XXXI.

THIS made again a delay in Dr. Burnet's plans. You cannot begin to make love to a girl when you have just told her of the serious illness, not likely to end in anything but death, which is hovering over her father. It is true that old Tredgold was not, could not, be the object of any passionate devotion on the part of his daughter. But even when the tie is so slight that, once broken, it has but a small effect on life, yet the prospect of that breaking is always appalling, more or less worse than the event itself. All that a man can say in such circumstances, Dr. Burnet said—that he would be at her service night or day, that everything he could do or think of he would do, and stand by her to the last. That was far more appropriate than professions of love, and it was a little trying to him to find that she had not even noticed how he looked at her, or that he said, "Dear Katherine!" which, to be sure, he had no right to say. She was not even aware of it! which is discouraging to a man.

Dr. Burnet was a good doctor, he knew what he was about; and it was not long before his prophecy came true. Mr. Tredgold was seized with an alarming attack in the spring, which brought him to the very verge of the grave, and from which at one time it was not expected he would ever rally. The old man was very ill, but very strong in spirit, and fought with his disease like a lion; one would have said a good old man to see him lying there with no apparent trouble on his mind, nothing to pre-occupy time or draw him away from the immediate necessity of battling for his life, which he did with a courage worthy of a better cause. His coolness, his self-possession, his readiness to second every remedy, and give himself

every chance, was the admiration of the watchers, doctors, and nurses alike, who were all on the alert to help him, and conquer the enemy. Could there be a better cause than fighting for your life? Not one at least of more intimate interest for the combatant; though whether it is worth so much trouble when a man is over seventy, and can look forward to nothing better than the existence of an invalid, is a question which might well be debated. Mr. Tredgold, however, had no doubt on the subject. He knew that he possessed in this life a great many things he liked—what he would have in another he had very little idea. Probably, according to all that he had ever heard, there would be no money there, and if any difference between the beggar and the rich man, a difference in favour of the former. He did not at all desire to enter into that state of affairs. And the curious thing was that it could never be discovered that he had anything on his mind. He did not ask for Stella, as the large circle of watchers outside who read the bulletins at the lodge, and discussed the whole matter with the greatest interest, feeling it to be as good as a play, fondly hoped. He never said a word that could be construed into a wish for her, never, indeed, mentioned her name. He did not even desire to have Katherine by him, it was said; he preferred the nurses, saying in his characteristic way that they were paid for it, that it was their business, and that he never in anything cared for amateurs; he said amateurs, as was natural, and it was exactly the sentiment which everybody had expected from Mr. Tredgold. But never to ask for Stella, never to call upon her at his worst moment, never to be troubled by any thought of injustice done to her, that was the extraordinary thing which the community could not understand. Most people had expected a tragic scene of remorse, telegrams flying over land and sea, at the cost of a sovereign a word—but what was that to Mr. Tredgold?—calling Stella home. The good people were confounded to hear, day by day, that no telegram had been sent. It would have been a distinction for the little post-office in Siplin to have a telegram of such a character to transmit to India. The postmistress awaited,

feeling as if she were an inferior, but still very important, personage in the play, attending her call to go on. But the call never came. When the patient was at his worst various ladies in the place, and I need not say Mrs. Shanks and Miss Mildmay, had many whispered conferences with the people at the post. "No telegram yet? Is it possible?"

"No, indeed, ma'am, not a word."

"I wonder at you for expecting it now," cried Miss Mildmay, angry at the failure of all those hopes which she had entertained as warmly as anyone. "What use would it be. She couldn't come now; he'll be gone, poor man, weeks and weeks before Stella could be here."

But Mr. Tredgold did not go, and then it began to be understood that he never meant nor expected to go, and that this was the reason why he did not disturb himself about Stella. The spectators were half satisfied, yet half aggrieved, by this conclusion, and felt, as he got slowly better, that they had been cheated out of their play; however, he was an old man, and the doctor shook his head over all the triumphant accounts of his recovery which were made in the local papers; and there was yet hope of a tragedy preceded by a reconciliation, and the restoration of Stella to all her rights. Dr. Burnet was, throughout the whole illness, beyond praise. He was at the Cliff at every available moment, watching every symptom. Not a day elapsed that he did not see Katherine two or three times to console her about her father, or to explain anything new that had occurred. They were together so much that some people said they looked as if they had been not only lovers but married for years, so complete seemed their confidence in each other and the way they understood each other. A glance at Dr. Burnet's face was enough for Katherine. She knew what it meant without another word; while he divined her anxiety, her apprehensions, her depression, as the long days went on without any need of explanation. "As soon as the old man is well enough there will, of course, be a marriage," it was generally said. "And, of course, the doctor will go and live there," said Mrs. Shanks, "such a comfort

to have the doctor always on the spot—and what a happy thing for poor Mr. Tredgold that it should be his son-in-law—a member of his family."

"Mr. Tredgold will never have a son-in-law in his house," said Miss Mildmay, "if Katherine is expecting that she is reckoning without her father. I don't believe *that* will ever be a marriage whatever you may say. What! send off Sir Charles Somers, a man with something at least to show for himself, and take in Dr. Burnet? I think, Jane Shanks, that you must be off your head!"

"Sir Charles Somers could never have been of any use to poor, dear Mr. Tredgold," said Mrs. Shanks, a little abashed, "and Dr. Burnet is. What a difference that makes!"

"It may make a difference—but it will not make that difference; and I shouldn't like myself to be attended by my son-in-law," said the other lady. "He might give you a little pinch of something at a critical moment; or he might change your medicine; or he might take away a pillow—you can't tell the things that a doctor might do—which could never be taken hold of, and yet——"

"Ruth Mildmay!" cried Mrs. Shanks, "for shame of yourself, do you think Dr. Burnet would murder the man?"

"No; I don't think he would murder the man," said Miss Mildmay decidedly, but there was an inscrutable look in her face, "there are many ways of doing a thing," she said, nodding her head to herself.

It appeared, however, that this time at least Dr. Burnet was not going to have the chance, whether he would have availed himself of it or not. Mr. Tredgold got better. He came round gradually, to the surprise of everybody but himself. When he was first able to go out in his bath chair he explained the matter to the kind friends who hastened to congratulate him, in the most easy way. "You all thought I was going to give in this time," he said, "but I never meant to give in. Nothing like making up your mind to it. Ask the doctor. I said from the beginning, 'I ain't going to die this bout, don't you think it.' *He* thought different; ignorant pack, doctors,

not one of 'em knows a thing. Ask him. He'll tell you it wasn't him a bit, nor his drugs neither, but me as made up my mind."

The doctor had met the little procession and was walking along by Mr. Tredgold's chair. He laughed and nodded his head in reply, "Oh yes, he is quite right. Pluck and determination are more than half of the battle," he said. He looked across the old man's chair to Katherine on the other side, who said hastily: "I don't know what we should have done without Dr. Burnet, papa."

"Oh, that's all very well," said old Tredgold. "Pay each other compliments, that's all right. He'll say, perhaps, I'd have been dead without your nursing, Katie. Not a bit of it! Always prefer a woman that is paid for what she does and knows her duty. Yes, here I am, Rector, getting all right, in spite of physic and doctors—as I always meant to do."

"By the blessing of God," said the Rector, with great solemnity. He had met the group unawares round a corner, and to see Burnet and Katherine together, triumphant, in sight of all the world, was bitter to the injured man. That this common country doctor should be preferred to himself added an additional insult, and he would have gone a mile round rather than meet the procession. Being thus, however, unable to help himself, the Rector grew imposing beyond anything that had ever been seen of him. He looked a Bishop, at least, as he stood putting forth no benediction, but a severe assertion that belied the words. "By the blessing of God," he said.

"Oh!" said old Mr. Tredgold, taken aback. "Oh yes, that's what you say. I don't mean to set myself against that. Never know, though, do you, how it's coming—queer thing to reckon on. Bat anyhow, here I am, and ten pounds for the poor, Rector, if you like, to show as I don't go against that view."

"I hope the improvement will continue," the Rector said, with his nose in the air. "Good morning, Miss Katherine, I congratulate you with all my heart."

On what did he congratulate her? The doctor, though his

complexion was not delicate, coloured high, and so did Katherine, without knowing exactly what was the reason; and Sliplin, drawing its own conclusions, looked on. The only indifferent person was Mr. Tredgold, always sure of his own intentions and little concerned by those of others, to whom blushes were of as little importance as any other insignificant trifles which did not affect himself.

It was perhaps this little incident which settled the question in the mind of the community. The Rector had congratulated the pair in open day; then, of course, the conclusion was clear that all the preliminaries were over—that they were engaged, and that Mr. Tredgold, who had rejected Sir Charles Somers, was really going to accept the doctor. The Rector, who, without meaning it, thus confirmed and established everything that had been mere imagination up to this time, believed it himself with all the virulence of an injured man. And Katherine, when Dr. Burnet had departed on his rounds and she was left to accompany her father home, almost believed herself that it must be true. He had said nothing to her which could be called a definite proposal, and she had certainly given no acceptance, no consent to anything of the kind, yet it was not impossible that without any intention, without any words, she had tacitly permitted that this should be. Looking back, it seemed to her, that indeed they had been always together during these recent days, and a great many things had passed between them in their meetings by her father's bedside, outside his door, or in the hall, at all times of the night and day. And perhaps a significance might be given to words which she had not attached to them. She was a little alarmed—confused—not knowing what had happened. She had met his eyes full of an intelligence which she did not feel that she shared, and she had seen him redden and herself had felt a hot colour flushing to her face. She did not know why she blushed. It was not for Dr. Burnet; it was from the Rector's look—angry, half malignant, full of scornful meaning. "I congratulate you!" Was that what it meant, and that this thing had really happened which had been floating in the air so long?

When she returned to the Cliff, Katherine did not go in, but went along the edge of the path, as she had done so often when she had anything in her mind. All her thinkings had taken place there in the days when she had often felt lonely and "out of it," when Stella was in the ascendant and everything had rolled on in accordance with her lively views. She had gone there with so many people to show them "the view," who cared nothing for the view, and had lingered afterwards while they returned to more noisy joys, to think with a little sigh that there was someone in the world, though she knew not where, who might have preferred to linger with her, but had been sent away from her, never to be seen more. And then there had been the night of Stella's escapade in the little yacht, and then of Stella's second flight with her husband, and of many a day beside when Katherine's heart had been too full to remain quietly indoors, and when the space, the sky, the sea, had been her consolers. She went there now, and with a languor which was half of the mind and half of the body walked up and down the familiar way. The tamarisks were beginning to show a little pink flush against the sea. It was not warm enough yet to develop the blossom wholly, but yet it showed with a tinge of colour against the blue, and all the flowering shrubs were coming into blossom and flowers were in every crevice of the rocks. It was the very end of April when it is verging into May, and the air was soft and full of the sweetness of the spring.

But Katherine's mind was occupied with other things. She thought of Dr. Barnet and whether it was true that she was betrothed to him and would marry him and have him for her companion always from this time forth. Was it true? She asked herself the question as if it had been someone else, some other girl of whom she had heard this, but almost with less interest than if it had been another girl. She would, indeed, scarcely have been moved had she heard that the doctor had been engaged to Charlotte Stanley or to anyone else in the neighbourhood. Was it true that it was she, Katherine Tredgold, who was engaged to him? The Rector's fierce look

had made her blush, but she did not blush now when she thought over this question alone. Was she going to marry Dr. Burnet? Katherine felt indifferent about it, as if she did not care. He would be useful to papa; he would be a friend to Stella—he would not oppose her in anything she might do for her sister. Why not he as well as another? It did not seem to matter so very much, though she had once thought, as girls do, that it mattered a great deal. There was Charlie Somers, for whom (though without intending it) Stella had sacrificed everything. Was he better worth than Dr. Burnet? Certainly, no. Why not, then, Dr. Burnet as well as another? Katherine said to herself. It was curious how little emotion she felt—her heart did not beat quicker, her breath came with a kind of languid calm. There were no particular objections that she knew of. He was a good man; there was nothing against him. Few country doctors were so well bred, and scarcely anyone so kind. His appearance was not against him either. These were all negatives, but they seemed to give her a certain satisfaction in the weariness of soul. Nothing against him, not even in her own mind. On the contrary, she approved of Dr. Burnet. He was kind, not only to her, but to all. He spared no trouble for his patients, and would face the storm, hurrying out in the middle of the night for any suffering person who sent for him without hesitation or delay. Who else could say the same thing? Perhaps the Rector would do it too if he were called upon. But Katherine was not disposed to discuss with herself the Rector's excellencies, whereas it seemed necessary to put before herself, though languidly, all that she had heard to the advantage of the doctor. And how many good things she had heard! Everybody spoke well of him, from the poorest people up to Lady Jane, who had as good as pointed him out in so many words as the man whom Katherine should marry. Was she about to marry him? Had it somehow been all settled?—though she could not recollect how or when.

She was tired by the long strain of her father's illness, not

so much by absolute nursing, though she had taken her share of that (but Mr. Tredgold, as has been said, preferred a nurse who was paid for her work on the ordinary business principle), as by the lengthened tension of mind and body, the waiting and watching and suspense. This no doubt was one great reason for her languid, almost passive, condition. Had Dr. Burnet spoken then she would have acquiesced quite calmly, and indeed she was not at all sure whether it might not have so happened already.

So she pursued her musing with her face towards the lawn and the shrubberies. But when Katherine turned to go back along the edge of the cliff towards the house, her eyes, as she raised them, were suddenly struck almost as by a blow, by the great breadth of the sea and the sky, the moving line of the coast, the faint undulation of the waves, the clouds upon the horizon white in flakes of snowy vapour against the unruffled blue. It was almost as if someone had suddenly stretched a visionary hand out of the distance, and struck her lightly, quickly, to bring her back to herself. She stood still for a moment with a shiver, confused, astonished, awakened—and then shook herself as if to shake something, some band, some chain, some veil that had been wound round her, away.

CHAPTER XXXII.

BUT whether the result of this awaking would have told for anything in Katherine's life had it not been for another incident which happened shortly after, it would be impossible to say. She forgot the impression of that sudden stroke of nature, and when she went back to her father, who was a little excited by his first outing, there revived again so strong an impression of the need there was of the doctor and his care, and the importance of his position in the house as a sort of *deus ex machinâ*, always ready to be appealed to and to perform miracles at pleasure, that the former state of acquiescence in whatever he might demand as the price of his services, came back strongly to her mind, and the possibility was that there would have been no hesitation on her part, though no enthusiasm, had he seized the opportunity during one of the days of that week, and put his fate to the touch. But a number of small incidents supervened; and there is a kind of luxury in delay in these circumstances which gains upon a man, the pleasure of the unacknowledged, the delightful sense of feeling that he is sure of a favourable response, without all the responsibilities which a favourable response immediately brings into being. The moment that he asked and Katherine consented, there would be the father to face, and all the practical difficulties of the position to be met. He would have to take "the bull by the horns." This is a very different thing from those preliminaries, exciting but delightful, which form the first step. To declare your sentiments to the girl you love, to receive that assent and answering confession of which you are almost sure—only so much uncertainty in it as makes the moment thrilling with an alarm and timidity which is more

sweet than confidence. That is one thing; but what follows is quite another; the doctor a little "finked," as he himself said, that next important step. There was no telling what might come out of that old demon of a father. Sometimes Dr. Burnet thought that he was being encouraged, that he had become so necessary to Mr. Tredgold that the idea of securing his attendance would be jumped at by the old man; and sometimes he thought otherwise. He was, in fact, though a brave man, frightened of the inevitable second step. And therefore he let the matter linger, finding much delight in the happy unconsciousness that he was risking nothing, that she understood him and all his motives, and that his reward was certain, when he did make up his mind to ask for it at last.

Things were in this condition when one day, encouraged by her father's improvement, Katherine went to town, as everybody in the country is bound to do, to go through that process which is popularly known as "shopping." In previous years Stella's enterprise and activity had provided clothes for every season as much in advance as fashion permitted, so that there never was any sudden necessity. But Katherine had never been energetic in these ways, and the result was that the moment arrived, taking her a little unawares, in which even Katherine was forced to see that she had nothing to wear. She went to town, accordingly, one morning in the beginning of June, attended by the maid who was no more than an elderly promoted upper housemaid, who had succeeded Stevens. Katherine had not felt herself equal to a second Stevens entirely for herself; indeed, she had been so well trained by Stella, who always had need of the services of everybody about her, that she was very well able to dispense with a personal attendant altogether. But it was an admirable and honourable retirement for Hannah to give up the more active work of the household and to become Miss Katherine's maid, and her conscientious efforts to fulfil the duties of her new position were entertaining at least. A more perfect guardian, if any guardian had been necessary, of all the decorums could not have been than was this highly respectable

person who accompanied her young mistress to London with a sense of having a great responsibility upon her shoulders. As a matter of fact, no guardian being in the least necessary, it was Katherine who took care of her, which came to exactly the same thing and answered all purposes.

The train was on this occasion rather full, and the young lady and her maid were put into a compartment in which were already two passengers, a lady and gentleman, at the other extremity of the carriage, to all appearance together. But it soon turned out that they were not together. The lady got out at one of the little stations at which they stopped, and then, with a little hesitation, the gentleman rose and came over to the side on which Katherine was. "It is long since we have met," he said in a voice which had a thrill in it, noticeable even to Hannah, who instinctively retired a little, leaving the place opposite Katherine at his disposition (a thing, I need not remark, which was quite improper, and ought not to have been done. Hannah could not for a long time forgive herself, when she thought it over, but for the moment she was dominated by the voice). "I have not seen you," he repeated, with a little faltering, "for years. Is it permitted to say a word to you, Miss Tredgold?"

The expression of his eyes was not a thing to be described. It startled Katherine all the more that she had of late been exposed to glances having a similar meaning, yet not of that kind. She looked at him almost with a gasp. "Mr. Stanford! I thought you were in India?"

"So I was," he said, "and so I am going to be in a few months more. What a curious unexpected happy—I mean occurrence—that I should have met you—quite by accident."

"Oh yes, quite by accident," she said.

"I have been in the island," he said, "and near Sliplin for a day or two, where it would have been natural to see you, and then when I was coming away in desp—without doing so, what a chance that of all places in the world you should have been put into this carriage."

He seemed so astonished at this that it was very difficult to get over it. Katherine took it with much more composure, and yet her heart had begun to beat at the first sound of his voice.

He asked her a great many questions about her father, about Stella; even, timidly, about herself, though it soon became apparent that this was not from any need of information. He had heard about Stella's marriage, "down there," with a vague indication of the point at which their journey began; and that Mr. Tredgold had been ill, and that—— But he did not end that sentence. It was easily to be perceived that he had acquired the knowledge somewhere that Katherine was still—Katherine—and took a great satisfaction in the fact. And then he began to tell her about himself. He had done very well, better than could have been expected. He had now a very good appointment, and his chief was very kind to him. "There are no fortunes to be made now in India—or, at least, not such as we used to hear were once made. The life is different altogether. It is not a long martyrdom and lakhs of rupees, but a very passable existence and frequent holidays home. Better that, I think."

"Surely much better," said Katherine.

"I think so. And then there are the hills—Simla, and so forth, which never were thought of in my father's time. They had to make up their minds and put up with everything. We have many alleviations—the ladies have especially," he added, with a look that said a great deal more. Why should he add by his looks so much importance to that fact? And how was it that Katherine, knowing nothing of the life in India, took up his meaning in the twinkling of an eye?

"But the ladies," she said, "don't desert the plains where their—their husbands are, I hope, to find safety for themselves on the hills?"

"I did not mean that," he said, with a flush of colour all over his brown face (Katherine compared it, in spite of herself, to Dr. Burnet's recent blush, with conclusions not favourable to the latter). "I mean that it is such a comfort to men

to think that—what is most precious to them in the world—may be placed in safety at any critical moment.”

“I wonder if that is Charlie Somers’ feeling,” Katherine said with an involuntary laugh. It was not that she meant to laugh at Charlie Somers; it was rather the irrestrainable expression of a lightening and rising of her own heart.

“No doubt every man must,” James Stanford said.

And they went on talking, he telling her many things which she did not fully understand or even receive into her mind at all, her chief consciousness being that this man—her first love—was the only one who had felt what a true lover should, the only one to whom her heart made any response. She did not even feel this during the course of that too rapid journey. She felt only an exhilaration, a softening and expansion of her whole being. She could not meet his eyes as she met Dr. Burnet’s; they dazzled her; she could not tell why. Her heart beat, running on with a tremulous accompaniment to those words of his, half of which her intelligence did not master at the time, but which came to her after by degrees. He told her that he was soon going back to India, and that he would like to go and see Stella, to let her know by an independent testimony how her sister was. Might he write and give her his report? Might he come—this was said hurriedly as the train dashed into the precincts of London, and the end of the interview approached—to Sliplin again one day before he left on the chance of perhaps seeing her—to inquire for Mr. Fredgold—to take anything she might wish to send to Lady Somers? Katherine felt the flush on her own face to be overwhelming. Ah, how different from that half-angry confused colour which she had been conscious of when the Rector offered his congratulations!

“Oh no,” she said with a little shake of her head, and a sound of pathos in her voice of which she was quite conscious; “my father is ill; he is better now, but his condition is serious. I am very—sorry—I am distressed—to say so—but he must not be disturbed, he must not. I have escaped for a little to-day. I—had to come. But at home I am al-

together taken up by papa. I cannot let you—lose your time—take the trouble—of coming for nothing. Oh, excuse me—I cannot——” Katherine said.

And he made no reply, he looked at her, saying a thousand things with his eyes. And then there came the jar of the arrival. He handed her out, he found a cab for her, performing all the little services that were necessary, and then he held her hand a moment while he said goodbye.

“May I come and see you off? May I be here when you come back?”

“Oh, no, no!” Katherine said, she did not know why. “I don’t know when we go back; it perhaps might not be till to-morrow—it might not be till—that is, no, you must not come, Mr. Stanford—I—cannot help it,” she said.

Still he held her hand a moment. “It must still be hope then, nothing but hope,” he said.

She drove away through London, leaving him, seeing his face wherever she looked. Ah, that was what the others had wanted to look like but had not been able—that was—all that one wanted in this world; not the Tredgold money, nor the fortune of the great City young man, nor the Rector’s dignity, nor Dr. Burnet’s kindness—nothing but that, it did not matter by what accompanied. What a small matter to be poor, to go away to the end of the earth, to be burned by the sun and wasted by the heat, to endure anything, so long as you had *that*. She trembled and was incoherent when she tried to speak. She forgot where to tell the cabman to go, and said strange things to Hannah, not knowing what she said. Her heart beat and beat, as if it was the only organ she possessed, as if she were nothing but one pulse, thumping, thumping with a delicious idiocy, caring for nothing, and thinking of nothing. Thinking of nothing, though rays and films of thought flew along in the air and made themselves visible to her for a moment. Perhaps she should never see him again; she had nothing to do with him, there was no link between them; and yet, so to speak, there was nothing else but him in the world. She saw the tall tower of the Parliament in a mist that some-

how encircled James Stanford's face, and broad Whitehall was full of that vapour in which any distinctions of other feature, of everything round about her, was lost.

How curious an effect to be produced upon anyone so reasonable, so sensible as Katherine! After a long time, she did not know how long, she was recalled to common day by her arrival at the dressmaker's where she had to get out and move and speak, all of which she seemed to do in a dream. And then the day turned round and she had to think of her journey back again. Why did she tell him not to come? It would have harmed nobody if he had come. Her father had not forbidden her to see him, and even had he forbidden her, a girl who was of age, who was nearly twenty-four, who had after all a life of her own to think of, should she have refrained from seeing him on that account? All her foundations were shaken, not so much by feeling of her own as by the sight and certainty of his feeling. She would not desert her father, never, never run away from him like Stella. But at least she might have permitted herself to see James Stanford again. She said to herself, "I may never marry him; but now I shall marry nobody else." And why had she not let him come, why might they not at least have understood each other? The influence of this thought was that Katherine did not linger for the afternoon train, to which Stanford after all did go, on the chance of seeing her, of perhaps travelling with her again, but hurried off by the very first, sadly disappointing poor Hannah, who had looked forward to the glory of lunching with her young mistress in some fine pastrycook's as Stevens had often described. Far from this, Hannah was compelled to snatch a bun at the station, in the hurry Miss Katherine was in; and why should she have hurried? There was no reason in the world. To be in London, and yet not in London, to see nothing, not even the interior of Verey's, went to Hannah's heart. Nor was Katherine's much more calm when she began to perceive that her very impetuosity had probably been the reason why she did not see him again; for who could suppose that she who had spoken of perhaps not

going till to-morrow, should have fled back again in an hour, by a slow train in which nobody who could help it ever went?

By that strange luck which so often seems to regulate human affairs, Dr. Burnet chose this evening of all others for the explanation of his sentiments. He paid Mr. Tredgold an evening visit, and found him very well; and then he went out to join Katherine, whom he saw walking on the path that edged the cliff. It was a beautiful June evening, serene and sweet, still light with the lingering light of day, though the moon was already high in the sky. There was no reason any longer why Dr. Burnet should restrain his feelings. His patient was well; there was no longer any indecorum, anything inappropriate, in speaking to Katherine of what she must well know was nearest to his heart. He, too, had been conscious of the movement in the air—the magnetic communication from him to her on the day of Mr. Tredgold's first outing, when they had met the Rector, and he had congratulated them. To Katherine it had seemed almost as if in some way unknown to herself everything had been settled between them, but Dr. Burnet knew different. He knew that nothing had been settled, that no words nor pledge had passed between them; but he had little doubt what the issue would be. He felt that he had the matter in his own hands, that he had only to speak and she to reply. It was a foregone conclusion, nothing wanting but the hand and seal.

Katherine had scarcely got beyond the condition of dreaming in which she had spent the afternoon. She was a little impatient when she saw him approaching. She did not want her thoughts to be disturbed. Her thoughts were more delightful to her than anything else at this moment, and she half resented the appearance of the doctor, whom her mind had forsaken as if he had never been. The dreaming state in which she was, the preoccupation with one individual interest is a cruel condition of mind. At another moment she would have read Dr. Burnet's meaning in his eyes, and would have been prepared at least for what was coming—she who knew so well

what was coming, who had but a few days ago acquiesced in what seemed to be fate. But now, when he began to speak, Katherine was thunderstruck. A sort of rage sprang up in her heart. She endeavoured to stop him, to interrupt the words on his lips, which was not only cruel but disrespectful to a man who was offering her his best, who was laying himself, with a warmth which he had scarcely known to be in him, at her feet. He was surprised at his own ardour, at the fire with which he made his declaration, and so absorbed in that that he did not for the first moment see how with broken exclamations and lifted hands she was keeping him off.

"Oh, don't, doctor! Oh, don't say so, don't say so!" were the strange words that caught his ear at last; and then he shook himself up, so to speak, and saw her standing beside him in the gathering dimness of the twilight, her face not shining with any sweetness of assent, but half-convulsed with pain and shame, her hands held up in entreaty, her lips giving forth these words, "Oh, don't say so!"

It was his turn to be struck dumb. He drew up before her with a sudden pause of consternation.

"What?" he cried—"what?" not believing his ears.

And thus they stood for a moment speechless, both of them. She had stopped him in the middle of his love tale, which he had told better and with more passion than he was himself sensible of. She had stopped him, and now she did not seem to have another word to say.

"It is my anxiety which is getting too much for me," he said. "You didn't say that, Katherine—not that? You did not mean to interrupt me—to stop me? No. It is only that I am too much in earnest—that I am frightening myself——"

"Oh, Dr. Barnet!" she cried, instinctively putting her hands together. "It is I who am to blame. Oh, do not be angry with me. Let us part friends. Don't—don't say that any more!"

"Say what?—that I love you, that I want you to be my wife? Katherine, I have a right to say it! You have known

for a long time that I was going to say it. I have been silent because of—for delicacy, for love's sake; but you have known. I know that you have known!" he cried almost violently, though in a low voice.

She had appealed to him like a frightened girl; now she had to collect her forces as a woman, with her dignity to maintain. "I will not contradict you," she said. "I cannot; it is true. I can only ask you to forgive me. How could I stop you while you had not spoken? Oh no, I will not take that excuse. If it had been last night it might have been otherwise, but to-day I know better. I cannot—it is impossible! Don't—oh don't let us say any more."

"There is a great deal more to be said!" he cried. "Impossible! How is it impossible? Last night it would have been possible, but to-day—— You are playing with me, Katherine! Why should it be impossible to-day?"

"Not from anything in you, Dr. Burnet," she said; "from something in myself."

"From what in yourself? Katherine, I tell you you are playing with me! I deserve better at your hands."

"You deserve—everything!" she cried, "and I—I deserve nothing but that you should scorn me. But it is not my fault. I have found out. I have had a long time to think; I have seen things in a new light. Oh, accept what I say! It is impossible—impossible!"

"Yet it was possible yesterday, and it may be possible to-morrow?"

"No, never again!" she said.

"Do you know," said the doctor stonily, "that you have led me on, that you have given me encouragement, that you have given me almost a certainty?—and now to cast me off, without sense, without reason——"

The man's lip quivered under the sting of this disappointment and mortification. He began not to know what he was saying.

"Let us not say any more—oh, let us not say any more! That was unkind that you said. I could give you no certainty,

for I had none; and to-day—I know that it is impossible! Dr. Burnet, I cannot say any more."

"But, Miss Tredgold," he cried in his rage, "there is a great deal more to be said! I have a right to an explanation! I have a right to—— Good heavens, do you mean that nothing is to come of it after all?" he cried.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

It turned out that there was indeed a great deal more to be said. Dr. Burnet came back after the extraordinary revelation of that evening. He left Katherine on the cliff in the silvery light of the lingering day, with all the tender mists of her dream dispersed, to recognise the dreadful fact that she had behaved very badly to a man who had done nothing but good to her. It was for this he had been so constant night and day. No man in the island had been so taken care of, so surrounded with vigilant attention, as old Mr. Tredgold—not for the fees he gave certainly, which were no more than those of any other man, not for love of him, but for Katherine. And now Katherine refused to pay the price—nay, more, stood up against any such plea—as if he had no right to ask her or to be considered more than another man. Dr. Burnet would not accept his dismissal, he would not listen to her prayer to say no more of it. He would not believe that it was true, or that by reasoning and explanation it might not yet be made right.

There were two or three very painful interviews in that corner of the drawing-room where Katherine had established herself, and which had so many happy associations to him. He reminded her of how he had come there day after day during the dreary winter, of that day of the snowstorm, of other days, during which things had been said and allusions made in which now there was no meaning. Sometimes he accused her vehemently of having played hot and cold with him, of having led him on, of having permitted him up to the very last to believe that she cared for him. And to some of these accusations Katherine did not know how to reply. She had not led him on, but she had permitted a great deal to be implied if not said,

and she had acquiesced. She could not deny that she had acquiesced even in her own mind. If she had confessed to him how little of her heart was in it at any time, or that it was little more than a mental consent as to something inevitable, that would have been even less flattering to him than her refusal; this was an explanation she could not make. And her whole being shrank from a disclosure of that chance meeting on the railway and the self-revelation it brought with it. As a matter of fact the meeting on the railway had no issue any more than the other. Nothing came of it. There was nothing to tell that could be received as a reason for her conduct. She could only stand silent and pale, and listen to his sometimes vehement reproaches, inalterable only in the fact that it could not be.

There had been a very stormy interview between them one of those evenings after he had left her father. He was convinced at last that it was all over, that nothing could be done, and the man's mortification and indignant sense of injury had subsided into a more profound feeling, into the deeper pang of real affection rejected and the prospects of home and happiness lost.

"You have spoiled my life," he had said to her. "I have nothing to look forward to, nothing to hope for. Here I am and here I shall be, the same for ever—a lonely man. Home will never mean anything to me but dreary rooms to work in and rest in; and you have done it all, not for any reason, not with any motive, in pure wantonness." It was almost more than he could bear.

"Forgive me," Katherine said. She did not feel guilty to that extent, but she would not say so. She was content to put up with the imputation if it gave him any comfort to call her names.

And then he had relented. After all had been said that could be said, he had gone back again to the table by which she was sitting, leaning her head on her arm and half covering it with her hand. He put his own hand on the same table and stooped a little towards her.

"All this," he said with difficulty, "will of course make no difference. You will send for me when I am wanted for your father all the same."

"Oh, Dr. Burnet!" was all she said.

"Of course," he said almost roughly, "you will send for me night or day all the same. It makes no difference. You may forsake me, but I will not forsake you." And with that, without a word of leavetaking or any courtesy, he went away.

Was that how she was to be represented to herself and the world now and for ever? Katherine sat with her head on her hand and her thoughts were bitter. It seemed hard, it seemed unjust, yet what could she say? She had not encouraged this man to love her or build his hopes upon her, but yet she had made no stand against it; she had permitted a great deal which, if she had not been so much alone, could not have been. Was it her fault that she was alone? Could she have been so much more than honest, so presumptuous and confident in her power, as to bid him pause, to reject him before he asked her? These self-excusing thoughts are self-accusing, as everybody knows. All her faults culminated in the fact that whereas she was dully acquiescent before, after that going to London the thing had become impossible. From that she could not save herself—it was the only truth. One day the engagement between them was a thing almost consented to and settled; next day it was a thing that could not be, and that through no fault in the man. He had done nothing to bring about such a catastrophe. It was no wonder that he was angry, that he complained loudly of being deceived and forsaken. It was altogether her fault, a fault fantastic, without any reason, which nothing she could say would justify. And indeed how could she say anything? It was nothing—a chance encounter, a conversation with her maid sitting by, and nothing said that all the world might not hear.

There was the further sting in all this that, as has been said, nothing had come, nothing probably would ever come, of that talk. Time went on and there was no sign—not so much as a note to say—What was there to say? Nothing! And

yet Katherine had not been able to help a faint expectation that something would come of it. As a matter of fact Stanford came twice to Siplin with the hope of seeing Katherine again, but he did not venture to go to the house where his visits had been forbidden, and either Katherine did not go out that day or an evil fate directed her footsteps in a different direction. The second time Mr. Tredgold was ill again and nothing could possibly be seen of her. He went to Mrs. Shanks', whom he knew, but that lady was not encouraging. She told him that Katherine was all but engaged to Dr. Burnet, that he had her father's life in his hands, and that nothing could exceed his devotion, which Katherine was beginning to return. Mrs. Shanks did not like lovers to be unhappy; if she could have married Katherine to both of them she would have done so; but that being impossible, it was better that the man should be unhappy who was going away, not he who remained. And this was how it was that Katherine saw and heard no more of the man whose sudden appearance had produced so great an effect upon her, and altered at a touch what might have been the current of her life.

It was not only Dr. Burnet who avenged his wrongs upon her. Lady Jane came down in full panoply of war to ask what Katherine meant by it.

"Yes, you did encourage him," she said. "I have seen it with my own eyes—if it were no more than that evening at my own house. He asked you to go into the conservatory with him on the most specious pretext, with his intentions as plainly written in his face as ever man's were. And you went like a lamb, though you must have known——"

"But, Lady Jane," said Katherine, "he said nothing to me, whatever his intentions may have been."

"No," said Lady Jane with a little snort of displeasure; "I suppose you snubbed him when you got him there, and he was frightened to speak. That is exactly what I object to. You have blown hot and blown cold, made him feel quite sure of you, and then knocked him down again like a ninepin. All that may be forgiven if you take a man at the end. But to

refuse him when it comes to the point at last, after having played him off and on so long—it is unpardonable, Katherine, unpardonable.”

“I am very sorry,” Katherine said, though indeed Lady Jane’s reproaches did not touch her at all. “It is a fact that I might have consented a few days ago; no, not happily, but with a kind of dull acquiescence because everybody expected it.”

“Then you allow that everybody had a right to expect it?”

“I said nothing about any right. You did all settle for me it appears without any will of mine; but I saw on thinking that it was impossible. One has after all to judge for oneself. I don’t suppose that Dr. Burnet would wish a woman to—to marry him—because her friends wished it, Lady Jane.”

“He would take you on any terms, Katherine, after all that has come and gone.”

“No one shall have me on any terms,” cried Katherine.

“It shall be because I wish it myself or not at all.”

“You have a great opinion of yourself,” said Lady Jane. “Under such a quiet exterior I never saw a young woman more self-willed. You ought to think of others a little. Dr. Burnet is far the best man you can marry in so many different points of view. Everybody says he has saved your father’s life. He is necessary, quite necessary, to Mr. Tredgold; and how are you to call him in as a doctor after disappointing him so? And then there is Stella. He would have done justice to Stella.”

“It will be strange,” cried Katherine, getting up from her seat in her agitation, “if I cannot do justice to Stella without the intervention of Dr. Burnet—or any man!”

Lady Jane took this action as a dismissal, and rose up, too, with much solemnity. “You will regret this step you have taken,” she said, “Katherine, not once but all your life.”

The only person who did not take a similar view was the Rector, upon whom the news, which of course spread in the same incomprehensible way as his own failure had done, had a very consolatory effect. It restored him, indeed, to much of

his original comfort and self-esteem to know that another man had been treated as badly as himself—more badly indeed, for at least there had been no blowing hot and cold with him. He said that Miss Katherine Tredgold was a singular young lady, and evidently, though she had the grace to say little about them, held some of the advanced ideas of the time. “She feels herself called to avenge the wrongs of her sex,” he said with a bitterness which was mitigated by the sense that another man was the present sufferer. But from most of her neighbours she received nothing but disapproval—disapproval which was generally unexpressed in words, for Katherine gave little opening for verbal remonstrance, but was not less apparent for that.

Miss Mildmay was, I think, the only one who took approvingly something of the same view. “If she is capricious,” that lady said, “there is plenty of caprice on the other side, loving and riding away and so forth; let them just try how they like it for once! I don’t object to a girl showing a little spirit, and doing to them as others have been done by. It is a very good lesson to the gentlemen.”

“Oh, Ruth Mildmay!” said Mrs. Shanks half weeping; “as if it could ever be a good thing to make a man unhappy for life!”

Mrs. Shanks felt that she knew more about it than anyone else, which would have been delightful but for the other consciousness that her intervention had done no good. She had not served Dr. Burnet, but she had sacrificed the other lover. And she had her punishment in not daring to whisper even to her nearest friend her special knowledge, or letting it be seen she knew—which but for her action in sending young Stanford away would have been a greater satisfaction than words can tell.

The result was that Katherine had a season of great discomfort and even unhappiness. She had freed herself from that passive submissiveness to fate into which she had been about to fall, but she had got nothing better in its place. She thought that he could not care much, since he had never even

tried to see or communicate with her, and she was ashamed of the rush with which her heart had gone out to him. She had not, she hoped, betrayed it, but she was herself aware of it, which was bad enough. And now that momentary episode was over and nothing had come of it—it was as if it had not been.

After this there came a long period of suspense and waiting in Katherine's life. Her father had one attack of illness after another, through all of which she was, if not the guiding spirit, at least the head and superintendent of all that went on in the house. The character of the house had changed when Stella left it. It changed still more now. It became a sick house, the home of an invalid. Even the city people, the old money-making friends, ceased to come from Saturday to Monday when it became known among them that old Mr. Tredgold was subject to a seizure at any time, and might be taken ill at last with all his friends sitting round him. This is not a thing that anyone likes to face, especially people who were as old as he was, and perhaps, they could not tell, might be liable to seizures too. When this occasional society failed at the Cliff all other kinds of society failed, too. Few people came to the house—a decorous caller occasionally, but nothing more. It was a very dull life for Katherine, everybody allowed, and some kind people held periodical consultations with each other as to what could be done for her, how she could be delivered from the monotony and misery of her life; but what could anyone do? The rector and the doctor were the most prominent men in Sliplin. A girl who had ill-treated them both could only be asked out with extreme discretion, for it was almost impossible to go anywhere without meeting one or other of these gentlemen. But the ladies might have spared themselves these discussions, for whatever invitations Katherine received she accepted none of them. She would not go to Steephill again, though Lady Jane was magnanimous and asked her. She would go nowhere. It showed that she had a guilty conscience, people said; and yet that it must be very dull for Katherine was what everybody, lamenting allowed.

She had trouble, too, from another quarter, which was perhaps worst of all. As the months went on and ran into years, Stella's astonishment that she was not recalled, her complaints, her appeals and denunciation of her sister as able to help her if she would do so, became manifold and violent. She accused Katherine of the most unlikely things, of shutting up their father, and preventing him from carrying out his natural impulses—of being her, Stella's, enemy when she had so often pledged herself to be her friend, even of having encouraged her, Stella, in the rash step she had taken, with intent to profit by it, and build her own fortune on her sister's ruin. Any stranger who had read these letters would have supposed that Katherine had been the chief agent in Stella's elopement—that it had been she that had arranged everything, and flattered Stella with hopes of speedy recall, only to betray her. Katherine was deeply moved by this injustice and unkindness at first, but soon she came to look at them with calm, and to take no notice of the outcries which were like outcries of a hurt child. There were so many things that called forth pity that the reproaches were forgotten. Stella's life—which had been so triumphant and gay, and which she had intended and expected should be nothing but a course of triumph and gaiety—had fallen into very different lines from any she had anticipated. After she had upbraided her sister for keeping her out of her rights, and demanded with every threat she could think of their restoration, and that Katherine should conspire no more against her, her tone would sink into one of entreaty, so that the epistle which had begun like an indictment ended like a begging letter. Stella wanted money, always money; money to keep her position, money to pay her debts, money at last for what she called the common necessities of life. There was scarcely a mail which did not bring over one of these appeals, which tore Katherine's heart. Though she was the daughter of so rich a man, she had very little of her own. Her allowance was very moderate, for Mr. Tredgold, though he was liberal enough, loved to be cajoled and flattered out of his money, as Stella had done—an art which Katherine had

never possessed. She had a little from her mother, not enough to be called a fortune, and this she sent almost entirely to her sister. She sent the greater part of her allowance to Lady Somers, content to confine herself to the plainest dress, in order to satisfy the wants of one who had always had so many wants. It was thus that her best years, the years of her brightest bloom and what ought to have been the most delightful of her life, passed dearly away.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE regiment had been six years in India and was ordered home before that lingering and perpetually-recurring malady of Mr. Tredgold's came to an end. It had come and gone so often—each seizure passing off in indeed a reduced condition of temporary relief and comfort, but still always in a sort of recovery—that the household had ceased to be alarmed by them as at first. He was a most troublesome patient, and all had to be on the alert when he was ill, from his personal attendant down to the grooms, who might at a moment's notice be sent scouring over the country after the doctor, without whom the old man did not think he could breathe when his attacks came on, and this notwithstanding the constant presence of the professional nurse, who was now a regular inmate; but the certainty that he would “come round” had by this time got finally established in the house. This gave a sense of security, but it dispelled the not altogether unpleasant solemnity of excitement with which a household of servants await the end of an illness which may terminate in death. There was nothing solemn about it at all—only another of master's attacks!—and even Katherine was now quite accustomed to be called up in the middle of the night, or sent for to her father's room at any moment, as the legitimate authority, without any thrill of alarm as to how things might end. Nobody was afraid of his life, until suddenly the moment came when the wheel was broken at the cistern and the much frayed thread of life snapped at last.

These had been strange years. Fortunately the dark times that pass over us come only one day at a time, and we are not aware that they are to last for years, or enabled to grasp them and consent that so much of life should be spent in that way.

It would no doubt have appalled Katherine, or any other young woman, to face steadily so long a period of trouble and give herself up to live it through, consenting that all the brightness and almost all the interest of existence should drop from her at the moment when life is usually at its fairest. She would have done it all the same, for what else could she do? She could not leave her father to go through all these agonies of ending life by himself, even though she was of so little use to him and he had apparently such small need of natural affection or support. Her place was there under all circumstances, and no inducement would have made her leave it; but when Katherine looked back upon that course of years it appalled her as it had not done when it was in course of passing day by day. She was twenty-three when it began and she was twenty-nine when it came to an end. She had been old for her age at the first, and she was still older for her age in outward appearance, though younger in heart, at the last—younger in heart, for there had been no wear and tear of actual life any more than if she had spent these years in a convent, and older because of the seclusion from society and even the severe self-restraint in the matter of dress, which, however, was not self-restraint so much as submission to necessity, for you cannot do two things with one sum of money, as many a poor housekeeper has to ascertain daily. Dressmakers' bills for Katherine were not consistent with remittances to Stella, and it was naturally the least important thing that was sacrificed. She had accordingly lost a great deal of her bloom and presented an appearance less fair, less graceful—perhaps less loveable—to the eyes of Dr. Burnet as she rose from the lonely fireside in her black dress, slim and straight, slimmer perhaps and straighter than of old—pale, without either reflection or ornament about her, looking, he thought, five-and-thirty, without any elasticity, prematurely settled down into the rigid outlines of an old maid, when he went into the well-known drawing-room in an October evening to tell her that at last the dread visitor, anticipated yet not believed in for so long, was now certainly at hand.

Dr. Burnet had behaved extremely well during all these years. He had not been like the rector. He had borne no malice, though he had greater reason to do so had he chosen. He never now made use of her Christian name and never allowed himself to be betrayed into any sign of intimacy, never lingered in her presence, never even looked at the tea on the little tea-table over which he had so often spent pleasant moments. He was now severely professional, giving her his account of his patient in the most succinct phrases and using medical terms, which in the long course of her father's illness Katherine had become acquainted with. But he had been as attentive to Mr. Tredgold as ever, people said; he had never neglected him, never hesitated to come at his call night or day, though he was aware that he could do little or nothing, and that the excellent nurse in whose hands the patient was was fully capable of caring for him; yet he always came, putting a point of honour in his sedulous attendance, that it never might be said of him that he had neglected the father on account of the daughter's caprice and failure. It might be added that Mr. Tredgold was a little revenue to the doctor—a sort of landed estate producing so much income yearly and without fail—but this was a mean way of accounting for his perfect devotion to his duty. He had never failed, however other persons might fail.

He came into the drawing-room very quietly and unannounced. He was not himself quite so gallant a figure as he had been when Katherine had left him *planté là*; he was a little stouter, not so perfect in his outline. They had both suffered more or less from the progress of years. She was thinner, paler, and he fuller, rougher—almost, it might be said, coarser—from five years more of exposure to all weathers and constant occupation, without any restraining influence at home to make him think of his dress, of the training of his beard, and other small matters. It had been a great loss to him, even in his profession, that he had not married. With a wife, and such a wife as Katherine Tredgold, he would have been avowedly the only doctor, the first in the island, in a position of absolute supremacy. As it was a quite inferior person, who

was a married man, ran him hard, although not fit to hold a candle to Dr. Burnet. And this, too, he set down more or less to Katherine's account. It is to be hoped that he did not think of all this on the particular evening the events of which I take so long to come to. And yet I am afraid he did think of it, or at least was conscious of it all in the midst of the deeper consciousness of his mission to-night. He could scarcely tell whether it was relief or pain he was bringing to her—a simpler or a more complex existence—and the sense of that enigma mingled with all his other feelings. She rose up to meet him as he came in. The room was dimly lighted; the fire was not bright. There was no chill in the air to make it necessary. And I don't know what it was which made Katherine divine the moment she saw the doctor approaching through the comparative gloom of the outer room that he was bringing her news of something important. Mr. Tredgold had not been worse than usual in the beginning of this attack; the nurse had treated it just as usual, not more seriously than before. But she knew at once by the sound of the doctor's step, by something in the atmosphere about him, that the usual had departed for ever and that what he came to tell her of was nothing less than death. She rose up to meet him with a sort of awe, her lips apart, her breath coming quick.

"I see," he said, "that you anticipate what I am going to say."

"No," she said with a gasp, "I know of nothing—nothing more than usual."

"That is all over," he answered with a little solemnity. "I am sorry I can give you so little hope—this time I fear it is the end."

"The end!" she cried, "the end!" She had known it from the first moment of his approach, but this did not lessen the shock. She dropped again upon her seat, and sat silent contemplating that fact—which no reasoning, no explanation, could get over. The end—this morning everything as usual, all the little cares, the hundred things he wanted, the constant

service—and afterwards nothing, silence, stillness, every familiar necessity gone. Katherine's heart seemed to stand still, the wonder of it, the terror of it, the awe—it was too deep and too appalling for tears.

After awhile she inquired, in a voice that did not seem her own, "Is he very ill? May I go to him now?"

"He is not more ill than you have seen him before. You can go to him, certainly, but there are some things that you must take into consideration, Miss Tredgold. He is not aware of any change—he is not at all anxious about himself. He thinks this is just the same as the other attacks. If you think it necessary that he should be made aware of his condition, either because of his worldly affairs, or—any other——" Dr. Burnet was accustomed to death-beds. He was not overawed like Katherine, and there seemed something ludicrous to him in the thought of old Tredgold, an old man of the earth, earthly, having—other affairs.

Katherine looked up at him, her eyes looking twice as large as usual in the solemnity of their trouble and awe. There seemed nothing else in the room but her eyes looking at him with an appeal, to which he had no answer to give. "Would it make any difference—now?" she said.

"I cannot tell what your views may be on that subject. Some are very eager that the dying should know—some think it better not to disturb them. It will do him no harm physically to be told; but you must be the judge."

"I have not thought of it—as I ought," she said. "Oh, Dr. Burnet, give me your opinion, give me your own opinion! I do not seem able to think."

"It might give him a chance," said the doctor, "to put right some wrong he might otherwise leave behind him. If what you are thinking of is that, he might put himself right in any spiritual point of view—at this last moment."

Katherine rose up as if she were blind, feeling before her with her hands. Her father, with all his imperfections—with nothing that was not imperfection or worse than imperfection—with a mind that had room for nothing but the lowest ele-

ments, who had never thought of anything higher, never asked himself whither he was going—— She walked straight forward, not saying anything, not able to bear another word. To put himself right—at the last moment. She felt that she must hasten to him, fly to him, though she did not know, being there, what she should do.

The room was so entirely in its usual condition—the nurse settling for the night, the medicines arranged in order, the fire made up, and the nightlight ready to be lighted—that it seemed more and more impossible to realise that this night there was likely to occur something different, something that was not on the invalid's programme. The only thing that betrayed a consciousness of any such possibility was the look which the nurse rapidly gave Katherine as she came in. "I am putting everything as usual," she said in a whisper, "but I think you should not go to bed." That was all—and yet out of everything thus settled and habitual around him, he was going away, going absolutely away to no one could tell where, perhaps this very night. Katherine felt herself stupefied, confounded, and helpless. He was going away all alone, with no directions, no preparations for the journey. What could she tell him of the way? Could any guide be sent with him? Could any instinct lead him? A man accustomed only to business, to the state of the stocks and the money market. Her heart began to beat so fast that it sickened her, and she was conscious of scarcely anything but its sound and the heaving of her breast.

The invalid, however, was not composed as usual. He was very restless, his eyes shining from his emaciated face. "Ah, that's you, Katie," he said; "it's too late for you to be up—and the doctor back again. What brings the doctor back again? Have you any more to do to me, eh, to-night?"

"Only to make sure that you're comfortable," Dr. Burnet said.

"Oh, comfortable enough—but restless. I don't seem as if I could lie still. Here, Katie, as you're here, change me a little—that's better—a hold of your shoulder—now I can push

myself about. Never been restless like this before, doctor. Nervous, I suppose you think?"

"No, you've never been like this before," the doctor said, with an unconsciously solemn voice.

"Oh, papa," cried Katherine, "you are very ill; I fear you are very ill."

"Nothing of the sort," he cried, pushing her away by the shoulder he had grasped; "nothing the matter with me—that is, nothing out of the ordinary. Come here, you nurse. I want to lie on the other side. Nothing like a woman that knows what she is about and has her living to make by it. Dear they are—cost a lot of money—but I never begrudged money for comfort."

"Papa," said Katherine. What could she say? What words were possible to break this spell, this unconsciousness and ignorance? It seemed to her that he was about to fall over some dreadful precipice without knowing it, without fearing it; was it better that he should know it, that he should fear, when he was incapable of anything else? Should the acute pang of mortal alarm before be added to—whatever there might be afterwards? Wild words whirled through her head—about the great judgment seat, about the reckoning with men for what they had done, and the cry of the Prophet, "Prepare to meet thy God." But how could this restless old man prepare for anything, turning and returning upon his bed. "Papa," she repeated, "have you anything to say to me—nothing about—about Stella?"

He turned his face to her for a moment with the old familiar chuckle in his throat. "About Stella—oh, you will hear plenty about Stella—in time," he said.

"Not only about Stella, papa! Oh, about other things, about—about—" she cried in a kind of despair, "about God."

"Oh," he said, "you think I'm going to die." The chuckle came again, an awful sound. "I'm not; you were always a little fool. Tell her, doctor, I'm going to sleep—tuck in the clothes, nurse, and put—out—the light."

The last words fell from him drowsily, and calm succeeded to the endless motion. There was another little murmur as of a laugh. Then the nurse nodded her head from the other side of the bed, to show that he was really going to sleep. Dr. Burnet put his hand on Katherine's arm and drew her into the dressing-room, leaving the door open between. "It may last only a few minutes," he said, "or it may last for ever; but we can do nothing, neither you nor I. Sit down and wait here."

It did last for ever. The sleep at first was interrupted with little wakings, and that chuckle which had been the accompaniment of his life broke in two or three times, ghastly, with a sort of sound of triumph. And then all sound died away.

Katherine was awakened—she did not know if it was from a doze or a dream—by a touch upon her arm. The doctor stood there in his large and heavy vitality like an embodiment of life, and a faint blueness of dawn was coming in at the window. "There was no pain," he said, "no sort of suffering or struggle. Half-past four exactly," he had his watch in his hand. "And now, Miss Tredgold, take this and go to bed."

"Do you mean?" Katherine cried, rising hastily, then falling back again in extreme agitation, trembling from head to foot.

"Yes, I mean it is all over, it is all *well* over. Everything has been done that could be done for him. And here is your maid to take care of you; you must go to bed."

But Katherine did not go to bed. She went downstairs to the drawing-room, her usual place, and sat by the dead fire, watching the blue light coming in at the crevices of the shutters, and listening to the steps of the doctor, quick and firm, going away upon the gravel outside. And then she went and wandered all over the house from one room to another, she could not tell why. It seemed to her that everything must have changed in that wonderful change that had come to pass without anyone being able to intervene, so noiselessly, so suddenly. She never seemed to have expected *that*. Any

thing else, it seemed to her now, might have happened but not that. Why, all the house had been full of him, all life had been full of him yesterday; there had been nothing to do but contrive what he should eat, how the temperature in the room should be kept up, how everything should be arranged for his comfort. And now he wanted nothing, nothing, nor was anything wanted for him. It did not seem to be grief that moved her so much as wonder, an intolerable pressure of surprise and perplexity that such a thing could have happened with so many about to prevent anything from happening, and that he should have been removed to some other place whom nobody could imagine to be capable of other conditions than he had here. What had he to do with the unseen, with sacred things, with heaven, with a spiritual life? Nothing, nothing, she said to herself. It was not natural, it was not possible. And yet it was true. When she at last lay down at the persuasion of Mrs. Simmons and the weeping Hannah, in the face of the new full shining day which had not risen for him, which cared for none of these things, Katherine still got no relief of sleep. She lay on her bed and stared at the light with no relief of tears either, with no sense of grief—only wondering, wondering. She had not thought of this change, although she knew that in all reason it must be coming. Still less did she think of the new world which already began to turn its dewy side to the light.

CHAPTER XXXV.

MR. TREDGOLD had no relations to speak of, and not very many old friends. Mr. Turny the elder, who was one of Mr. Tredgold's executors, came down for the funeral, and so did the solicitor, Mr. Sturgeon, who was the head of a great city firm, and would certainly not have spared the time had the fortune that was now to become a subject of so much interest been less great. He brought with him a shabby man, who was in his office and carried a black bag with papers, and also turned out to be Mr. Tredgold's brother, the only other member of the family who was known. His appearance was a surprise to Katherine, who had not heard of his existence. She was aware there had been aunts, married and bearing different names, and that it was possible perhaps to find cousins with those designations, which, however, she was not acquainted with; but an uncle was a complete surprise to her. And indeed, to tell the truth, to say "uncle" to this shambling individual in the long old great-coat, which she recognised as a very ancient garment of her father's, was not a pleasant sensation. She shrank from the lean, grey, hungry, yet humble being who evidently was very little at his ease sitting at the same table with his master, though he attempted, from time to time, to produce himself with a hesitating speech. "He was my brother, you know—I was his brother, his only brother," which he said several times in the course of the long dreadful evening which preceded the funeral day. Katherine in compassion carried off this new and terrible relative into the drawing-room while the two men of business discoursed together. Mr. Robert Tredgold did not like to be carried off from the wine. He saw in this step precautionary measures to which

he was accustomed, though Katherine did not even know of any occasion for precaution—and followed her sulkily, not to the drawing-room, but to that once gay little room which had been the young ladies' room in former days. Katherine had gone back to it with a sentiment which she herself did not question or trace to its origin, but which no doubt sprang from the consciousness in her mind that Stella was on her way home, and that there was no obstacle now in the way of her return. She would have been horrified to say in words that her father was the obstacle who had been removed, and the shock and awe of death were still upon her. But secretly her heart had begun to rise at the thought of Stella, and that it would be her happy office to bring Stella home.

"It ain't often I have the chance of a good glass of wine," Robert Tredgold said; "your poor father was a rare judge of wine, and then you see he had always the money to spend on it. My poor brother would have given me a chance of a glass of good wine if he'd brought me here."

"Would you like the wine brought here? I thought you would be happier," said Katherine, "with me than with those gentlemen."

"I don't see," he said, somewhat sullenly, "why I ain't as good as they are. Turny's made a devil o' money, just like my poor brother, but he's no better than us, all the same; and as for old Sturgeon, I know him well enough, I hope. My poor brother would never have let that man have all his business if it hadn't been for me. I heard him say it myself. 'You provide for Bob, and you shall have all as I can give you.' Oh, he knows which side his bread's buttered on, does Sturgeon. Many a time he's said to me, 'A little more o' this, Bob Tredgold, and you shall go,' but I knew my brother was be'ind me, bless you. I just laughed in his face. 'Not while my brother's to the fore,' I've always said."

"Eat," said Katherine, "poor papa is not, as you say, to the fore now."

"No; but he's provided for me all right; he always said as he would provide for me. I haven't, perhaps, been as steady

as I ought. He never wanted me to show along of his fine friends. But for a couple of fellows like that, that know all about me, I don't see as I need have been stopped of a good glass of my brother's port wine."

"You shall not, indeed," said Katherine, ringing the bell.

"And I say," said this uncomfortable uncle, "you can tell them to bring the spirit case as well. I saw as there was a spirit case, with five nice bottles, and lemons and sugar, and a kettle, you know, though there ain't nothing to set it upon as I can see in that bit of a fireplace—uncomfortable thing, all shine and glitter and no use. I daresay my poor brother had some sort of a 'ob for the hot water in any room as he sat in—I say, old gentleman, bring us——"

Katherine interposed with her orders, in haste, and turned the butler hastily away. "You must remember," she said, "that to-night is a very sad and terrible night in this house."

"Ah! Were they all as fond of him as that?" the brother said.

"Oh," said Katherine, "if you are my uncle, as they say, you should stand by me and help me; for there is sure to be a great deal of trouble, however things turn out."

"I'll stand by you! Don't you be afraid, you can calculate on me. I don't mind a bit what I say to old Sturgeon nor Turny neither, specially as I know he's provided for me, my poor brother 'as, he always said as he would. I don't consider myself in old Sturgeon's office not from this day. My poor brother 'as provided for me, he always said he would; and I'll stand by you, my dear, don't you be afraid. Hullo! here's nothing but the port wine—and not too much of that neither. I say, you fellow, tell the old man to bring the spirits; and he can sit down himself and 'ave a glass; it's a poor 'cart as never rejoices, and once in a way it'll do him no harm."

"The other gentlemen—have got the spirits," the footman said, retiring, very red in the face with laughter suppressed.

"And what a poor house," said Bob Tredgold, contemptuously, "to have but one case of spirits! I've always noticed

as your grand houses that are all gilt and grandeur are the poorest—as concern the necessities of life.”

Katherine left her uncle in despair with his half-filled bottle of port. He was not a very creditable relation. She went to her own room and shut herself in to think over her position. In the fulness of her thoughts she forgot the dead master of the house, who lay there all silent, having nothing now to do with all that was going on in it, he who a little while ago had been supreme master of all. She did not know or ask what he had done with his wealth, no question about it entered her mind. She took it for granted that, Stella being cut off, it would come to herself as the only other child—which was just the same as if it had been left to Stella in their due and natural shares. All that was so simple, there was no need to think of it. Even this dreadful uncle—if her father had not provided for him Katherine would, there was no difficulty about all that. If the money was hers, it would be hers only for the purpose of doing everything with it which her father ought—which if he had been in his right condition, unbiassed by anger or offence, he would have done. He had always loved Stella best, and Stella should have the best—the house, every advantage, more than her share.

Katherine sat down and began to think over the work she would have to do in the ensuing week or so, till the *Aurungzebe* arrived with Lady Somers on board. The ship was due within a few days, and Katherine intended to go to meet her sister, to carry her, before she landed even, the news which, alas! she feared would only be good news to Stella. Alas! was it not good news to Katherine too? She stopped and wept a few bitter tears, but more for the pity of it, the horror of it, than for grief. Stella had been his favourite, his darling, and yet it would be good news to Stella. Her sister hoped that she would cry a little, that her heart would ache a little with the thought of never more seeing her father, never getting his forgiveness, nor any kind message or word from him. But at the utmost that would be all, a few tears, a regret, an exclamation of “poor papa!” and then joy at the good

news, joy to be delivered from poverty and anxiety, to be able to surround herself again with all the beautiful things she loved, to provide for her children (she had two by this time), and to replace her husband in his position. Was it possible that she could weep long, that she could mourn much for the father who had cast her off and whom she had not seen for six years, with all this happiness behind? Katherine herself had but few tears to shed. She was sad because she was not sufficiently sad, because it was terrible that a human soul should go away out of the world and leave so few regrets, so little sorrow behind. Even the old servants, the housekeeper who had been with him for so many years, his personal attendant, who had been very kind, who had taken great care of him, were scarcely sorry. "I suppose, Miss, as you'll be having Miss Stella home now," Mrs. Simmons said, though she had a white handkerchief in her hand for appearance sake. And the man was chiefly anxious about his character and the testimonials to be given him. "I hope as I never neglected my duty. And master was an 'eavy 'andful, Miss," he said, with relief, too, in his countenance. Katherine thought she would be willing to give half of all she had in the world to secure one genuine mourner, one who was truly sorry for her father's death. Was she herself sorry? Her heart ached with the pity and the horror of it, but sorrow is a different sentiment from that.

In the meantime the solicitor and executor were in Mr. Tredgold's sitting-room which he had occupied so long. A fire had been lighted in haste, to make the cold uninhabited place a little more cheerful. It was lighted by a lamp which hung over the table, shaded so as to concentrate its light on that spot, leaving all the rest of the room in the dark. And the two forms on either side of it were not of a character to be ennobled by the searching light. The solicitor was a snuffy man, with a long lean throat and a narrow head, with tufts of thin, grey hair. He had a rigged grey beard of the same description, long and ill grown, and he wore spectacles pushed out from his eyes and projecting as if they might fall off alto-

gether. Mr. Turny had a shining bald head, which reflected the light, bent, as it was, over the papers on the table. They had been examining these papers, searching for the will which they expected to find there, but had come as yet upon no trace of it.

"I should have thought," said Mr. Turny, "that he'd have had another will drawn out as soon as that girl ran away—indeed I was in a great mind to take steps——" He stopped here, reflecting that it was as well perhaps to say nothing of Fred and what those steps were. But Mr. Sturgeon had heard of the repeated visits of the family, and knew that young Fred was "on the outlook," as they said, and knew.

"Ah, here it is at last," Mr. Sturgeon said. He added, after a few minutes, in a tone of disappointment: "No, it's the old will of ten years ago, the one I sent him down at his own request after the young lady ran away. I kept expecting for a long time to have his instructions about another, and even wrote to him on the subject. I suppose he must have employed some man here. This, of course, must be mere waste paper now."

"What was the purport of it?" Mr. Turny asked.

"You must have heard at the time. It was not a will I approved—nothing unnatural ever gets any support from me. They say lawyers are full of dodges; it would have been better for me if I had put my principles in my pocket many a time. Men have come to me with the most ridiculous instructions, what I call wicked—they take a spite at some one, or some boy behaves foolishly (to be sure, it's a girl in this case, which is more uncommon), and out he goes out of the will. I don't approve of such pranks for my part."

"You would like the good to share with the bad, and the guilty with the innocent," said Turny, not without a reflection of his own.

"Not so much as that; but it doesn't follow—always—that a boy is bad because he has kicked over the traces in his youth—and if he is bad, then he is the one above all that wants some provision made for him to keep him from getting badder.

There's that poor wretch, Bob Tredgold ; I've kept him in my office, he thinks, because his brother always stood up for him. Nothing of the kind ; Tredgold would have been delighted to hear he had tripped into the mire or gone down under an underground railway train on his way home. And the poor beggar believes now that his brother has provided for him—not a penny will he have, or I am mistaken. I must try to get something for him out of the girls."

"The oldest girl, of course, will have it all?" Mr. Turny said.

"I suppose so," said the solicitor, "if he don't prove intestate after all ; that's always on the cards with that sort of man, indeed with every sort of man. They don't like to part with it even on paper, and give the power into someone else's hands. Women are rather different. It seems to amuse them to give all their things away—on paper. I don't know that there's much good searching further. He must have sent for some local man, that would save him trouble. And then he knew I would remonstrate if there was any ridiculous vengeance in his thoughts, which most likely there would have been."

"What's the scope of that old one, the one you've got in your hand?"

"Oh, that!" said Mr. Sturgeon, looking at it as if it were a reptile. "You remember, I am sure you must have heard it at the time, most of the money was left to the other, what was her ridiculous name? Something fantastic, I know."

"Stella," the executor said, peering eagerly through his double gold glasses at the paper, into which his fellow executor showed no inclination to give him further insight.

"That's it, Stella! because she was his favourite—the eldest sister, to my mind, being much the nicest of the two."

"She is a nice, quiet girl," said Mr. Turny. And he thought with a grudge of Fred, who might have been coming into this fine fortune if he had been worth his salt. "There is this advantage in it," he said, "it makes a fine solid lump of money. Divide it, and it's not half the good."

"A man shouldn't have a lot of children who entertains that idea," said Mr. Surgeon.

"That's quite true. If Mr. Tredgold had kept up his business as I have done; but you see I can provide for my boys without touching my capital. They are both in the business, and smart fellows, too, I can tell you. It does not suffer in their hands."

"We haven't got girls going into business—yet," said the solicitor; "there is no saying, though, what we may see in that way in a year or two; they are going it now, the women are."

"No girls of mine certainly shall ever do so. A woman's sphere is 'ome. Let 'em marry and look after their families, that is what I always say to mine."

"They are best off who have none," said the solicitor briefly. He was an old bachelor, and much looked down upon by his city clients, who thought little of a man who had never achieved a wife and belongings of his own.

"Well, that depends," Mr. Turny said.

"I think we may as well go to bed," said the other. "It's not much of a journey, but the coming is always a bother, and we'll have a heavy day to-morrow. I like to keep regular hours."

"Nothing like 'em," said Mr. Turny, rising too; "no man ever succeeds in business that doesn't keep regular hours. I suppose you'll have to find out to-morrow if there's been any other solicitor employed."

"Yes, I'll see after that—funeral's at two, I think?"

"At two," said the other. They lit their candles with some solemnity, coming out one after the other into the lighted hall. The hall was lighted, but the large staircase and corridors above were dark. They separated at the head of the stairs and went one to the right and the other to the left, Mr. Turny's bald head shining like a polished globe in the semi-darkness, and the solicitor, with his thin head and projecting spectacles, looking like some strange bird making its way through the night. Mr. Surgeon passed the door within which his dead client was lying, and hesitated a moment as he did so. "If

we only knew what was in that damned head of yours before the face was covered over," he said to himself. He was not in an easy condition of mind. It was nothing to him; not a penny the poorer would he be for anything that might happen to the Tredgold girls. Bob Tredgold would be turned off into the workhouse, which was his proper place, and there would be an end of him. But it was an ugly trick for that old beast to play, to get some trumpery, country fellow, who no doubt would appear to-morrow, like the cock-o'-the-walk, with his new will and all the importance of the family solicitor. Family, indeed. They hadn't a drop of blood in their veins that was better than mad, though that eldest one was a nice girl. It was something in her favour, too, that she would not have Fred Turny, that City Swell. But the great point of offence with Mr. Sturgeon was that the old beast should have called in some local man.

Bob Tredgold, the only brother, was escorted upstairs by one of the footmen a little later in the night. He was very affectionate with John Thomas, and assured him of his continued friendship when he should have come into his annuity. "Always promised to provide for me, don't ye know, did my poor brother; not capital 'cause of this, don't ye know," and the unfortunate made the sign of lifting a glass to his mouth; "'nuity, very com-m-for-able, all the rest of my life. Stand a good glass to any man. Come and see me, any time you're there, down Finsbury way." John Thomas, who appreciated a joke, had a good laugh to himself after he had deposited this *triste* personage in the room which was so much too fine for him. And then the footman remembered what it was that was lying two or three doors off, locked in there with the lights burning, and went softly with a pale face to his own den, feeling as if Master's bony hand might make a grab at his shoulder any moment as he hurried down the stairs.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

MR. STURGEON had carried off the old will with him from Mr. Tredgold's bureau, the document drawn up in his own office in its long blue envelope, with all its details rigorously correct. He put it into his own bag, the bag which Bob Tredgold had carried. Bob's name was not in it; there were no gracious particulars of legacy or remembrance. Perhaps the one which he fully expected to be produced to-morrow would be more humane. And yet in the morning he took this document out again and read it all over carefully. There were one or two pencil-marks on it on the margin, as of things that were meant to be altered, but no change whatever, no scribbling even of other wishes or changed intentions. The cross in pencil opposite Stella's name was the only indication of any altered sentiment, and that, of course, was of no consequence and meant nothing. The solicitor read it over and put it back again carefully. If by any chance there was no other will to propound! But that was a thing not to be contemplated. The old beast, he said to himself, was not surely such an old beast as that.

Old Mr. Tredgold was buried on a bright October day, when everything about was full of colour and sunshine. His own trees, the rare and beautiful shrubs and foliage which had made his grounds a sight for tourists, were all clad in gala robes, in tints of brown and yellow and crimson, with feathery seedpods and fruit, hips and haws and golden globes to protect the seed. As he was carried away from his own door a gust of playful wind scattered over the blackness of the vehicle which carried him a shower of those gay and fluttering leaves. If it had been any fair creature one would have said it was

Nature's own tribute to the dead, but in his case it looked more like a handful of coloured rags thrown in mockery upon the vulgar hearse.

And it was a curious group which gathered round the grave. The rector, stately in his white robes, with his measured tones, who had indeed sat at this man's board and drank his wine, but had never been admitted to speak a word of spiritual admonition or consolation (if he had any to speak), and who still entertained in his heart a grudge against the other all wrapped in black, who stood alone, the only mourner, opposite to him, with the grave between them. Even at that moment, and while he read those solemn words, Mr. Stanley had half an eye for Katherine, half a thought for her loneliness, which even now he felt she had deserved. And behind her was the doctor, who had stood by her through every stage of her father's lingering illness, certainly taking no personal vengeance on her—far, oh far from that!—yet never forgetting that she had dismissed him amid circumstances that made the dismissal specially bitter—encouraged him, drawn him on, led him to commit himself, and then tossed him away. He had been very kind to Katherine; he had omitted no one thing that the tenderest friend could have done, but he had never forgotten nor forgiven her for what she had done to him. Both of these men thought of her as perhaps triumphant in her good fortune, holding much power in her hands, able to act as a Providence to her sister and to others, really a great lady now so far as money goes. The feeling of both in their different way was hostile to Katherine. They both had something against her; they were angry at the position which it was now expected she would attain. They were not sorry for her loneliness, standing by that grave. Both of them were keenly aware that it was almost impossible for her to entertain any deep grief for her father. If she had, it would have softened them perhaps. But they did not know what profound depression was in her mind, or if they had known they would have both responded with a careless exclamation. Depression that would last for a day! Sadness, the effect of the circumstances,

which would soon be shaken off in her triumph. They both expected Katherine to be triumphant, though I cannot tell why. Perhaps they both wished to think ill of her if they could now that she was out of their reach, though she had always been out of their reach, as much six years ago as to-day.

The church, the churchyard, every inch of space, was full of people. There is not very much to look at in Sliplin, and the great hearse with its moving mass of flowers was as fine a sight as another. Flowers upon that old curmudgeon, that old vile man with his money who had been of no use to anyone! But there were flowers in plenty, as many as if he had been beautiful like them. They were sent, it is to be supposed, to please Katherine, and also from an instinctive tribute to the wealth which gave him importance among his fellow-men, though if they could have placed the sovereigns which these wreaths cost upon his coffin it would have been a more appropriate offering. Sir John and Lady Jane sent their carriage (that most remarkable of all expressions of sympathy) to follow in the procession. That, too, was intended to please Katherine, and the wreath out of their conservatory as a reminder that Stella was to be provided for. Mr. Tredgold thus got a good deal of vicarious honour in his last scene, and he would have liked it all had he been there (as perhaps he was) to see. One thing, however, he would not have liked would have been the apparition of Robert Tredgold, dressed for the occasion in his brother's clothes, and saying, "He was my brother. I'm his only brother!" to whoever would listen. Bob was disappointed not to give his niece his arm, to stand by her as chief mourner at the foot of the grave.

They all went into the drawing-room when they returned to the house. Katherine had no thought of business on that particular day, and her father's room was too cold and dreary, and full as of a presence invisible, which was not a venerable presence. She shuddered at the idea of entering it; and probably because she was alone, and had no one to suggest it to her, the idea of a will to be read, or arrangements to be

settled, did not enter into her mind. She thought they were coming to take leave of her when they all trooped into the gay, much-decorated room, with its gilding and resplendent mirrors. The blinds had been drawn up, and it was all as bright as the ruddy afternoon and the blazing fire could make it. She sat down in her heavy veil and cloak and turned to them, expecting the little farewell speeches, and vulgar consolations, and shaking of hands. But Mr. Sturgeon, the solicitor, drew his chair towards the round table of Florentine work set in gay gilding, and pushed away from before him the books and nick-nacks with which it was covered. His black bag had somehow found its way to him, and he placed it as he spoke between his feet.

"I have had no opportunity all day of speaking to you, Miss Katherine," he said, "nor last night. You retired early, I think, and our search was not very productive. You can tell me now, perhaps, what solicitor your late father, our lamented friend, employed. He ought to have been here."

"He engaged no solicitor that I know of," she replied. "Indeed, I have always thought you had his confidence—more than anyone——"

"I had," said the solicitor. "I may say I had all his affairs in my hands; but latterly I supposed—— There must surely be someone here."

"No one that I know of," said Katherine. "We can ask Harrison if you like. He knew everything that went on."

Here there uprose the voice of Bob Tredgold, who even at lunch had made use of his opportunities.

"I want to have the will read," he said; "must have the will read. It's a deal to me is that will. I'm not going to be hung up any more in suspense."

"Catch hold of this bag," said the solicitor contemptuously, flinging it to him. Mr. Sturgeon had extracted from it the long blue envelope which he had found in Mr. Tredgold's bureau—the envelope with his own stamp on it. Mr. Turny fixed his eyes upon this at once. Those little round eyes began to glisten, and his round bald head—the excite-

ment of a chance which meant money, something like the thrill of the gambler, though the chance was not his, filled him with animation. Katherine sat blank, looking on at a scene which she did not understand.

"Harrison, will you tell this gentleman whether my father"—she made a little pause over the words—"saw any solicitor from Sliplin, or did any business privately?"

"Within the last five or six years?" Mr. Sturgeon added.

"No solicitor, sir," the man answered at once, but with a gleam in his eyes which announced more to say.

"Go on, you have got something else in your mind. Let us hear what it is, and with no delay."

"Master, sir," said Harrison thus adjured, "he said to me more than once, 'I'm a going to send for Sturgeon,' he says. Beg your pardon, sir, for naming you like that, short."

"Go on—go on."

"And then he never did it, sir," the man said.

"That's not the question. Had he any interview, to your knowledge, with any solicitor here? Did he see anybody on business? Was there any signing of documents? I suppose you must have known?"

"I know everything, sir, as master did. I got him up, sir, and I put him to bed. There was never one in the house as did a thing for him but me. Miss Katherine she can tell as I never neglected him; never was out of the way when he wanted me; had no 'olidays, sir." Harrison's voice quivered as he gave this catalogue of his own perfections, as if with pure self-admiration and pity he might have broken down.

"It will be remembered in your favour," said Mr. Sturgeon. "Now tell me precisely what happened."

"Nothing at all happened, sir," Harrison said.

"What, nothing? You can swear to it? In all these five, six years, nobody came from the village, town—whatever you call it—whom he consulted with, who had any documents to be signed, nothing, nobody at all?"

"Nothing!" said Harrison with solemnity, "nothing! I'll take my Bible oath; now and then there was a gentleman

subscribing for some charity, and there was the doctor every day or most every day, and as many times as I could count on my fingers there would be some one calling, that gentleman, sir," he said suddenly, pointing to Mr. Turny, who looked up alarmed as if accused of something, "as was staying in the house."

"But no business, no papers signed?"

"Hadn't you better speak to the doctor, Sturgeon? He knew more of him than anyone."

"Not more nor me, sir," said Harrison firmly; "nobody went in or out of master's room that was unknown to me."

"This is all very well," said Bob Tredgold, "but it isn't the will. I don't know what you're driving at; but it's the will as we want—my poor brother's daughter here, and me."

"I think, Miss Katherine," said the lawyer, "that I'd rather talk it over with—with Mr. Turny, who is the other executor, and perhaps with the doctor, who could tell us something of your father's state of mind."

"What does it all mean?" Katherine said.

"I'd rather talk it over first; there is a great deal of responsibility on our shoulders, between myself and Mr. Turny, who is the other executor. I am sorry to keep you waiting, Miss Katherine."

"Oh, it is of no consequence," Katherine said. "Shall I leave you here? Nobody will interrupt you, and you can send for me if you want me again. But perhaps you will not want me again?"

"Yes, I fear we shall want you." The men stood aside while she went away, her head bowed down under the weight of her veil. But Robert Tredgold opposed her departure. He caught her by the cloak and held her back. "Stop here," he said, "stop here; if you don't stop here none of them will pay any attention to me."

"You fool!" cried the lawyer, pushing him out of the way, "what have you got to say to it? Take up your bag, and mind your business; the will is nothing to you."

"Don't speak to him so," cried Katherine. "You are all

so well off and he is poor. And never mind," she said, touching for a moment with her hand the arm of that unlovely swaying figure. "I will see that you are provided for, whether it is in the will or not. Don't have any fear."

The lawyer followed her with his eyes, with a slight shrug of his shoulders and shake of his head. Dr. Burnet met her at the door as she went away.

"They have sent for me," he said; "I don't know why. Is there anything wrong? Can I be of any use?"

"I know of nothing wrong. They want to consult you, but I don't understand on what subject. It is a pity they should think it's necessary to go on with their business to-day."

"They have to go back to town," he said.

"Yes, to be sure, I suppose that is the reason," she answered, and with a slight inclination of her head she walked away.

But no one spoke for a full minute after the doctor joined them; they stood about in the much gilded, brightly decorated room, in the outer portion outside that part which Katherine had separated for herself. Her table, with its vase of flowers, her piano, the low chair in which she usually sat, were just visible within the screen. The dark figures of the men encumbered the foreground between the second fireplace and the row of long windows opening to the ground. Mr. Sturgeon stood against one of these in profile, looking more than ever like some strange bird, with his projecting spectacles and long neck and straggling beard and hair.

"You sent for me, I was told," Dr. Burnet said.

"Ah, yes, yes." Mr. Sturgeon turned round. He threw himself into one of the gilded chairs. There could not have been a more inappropriate scene for such an assembly. "We would like you to give us a little account of your patient's state, doctor," he said, "if you will be so good. I don't mean technically, of course. I should like to know about the state of his mind. Was he himself? Did he know what he was doing? Would you have said he was able to take a clear

view of his position, and to understand his own intentions and how to carry them out?"

"Do you mean to ask me if Mr. Tredgold was in full possession of his faculties? Perfectly, I should say, and almost to the last hour."

"Did he ever confide in you as to his intentions for the future, Doctor? I mean about his property, what he meant to do with it? A man often tells his doctor things he will tell to no one else. He was very angry with his daughter, the young lady who ran away, we know. He mentioned to you, perhaps, that he meant to disinherit her—to leave everything to her sister?"

"My poor brother," cried Bob Tredgold, introducing himself to Dr. Burnet with a wave of his hand, "I'm his only brother, sir—swore always as he'd well provide for me."

Dr. Burnet felt himself offended by the question; he had the instinctive feeling so common in a man who moves in a limited local circle that all his own affairs were perfectly known, and that the expectations he had once formed, and the abrupt conclusion to which they had come, were alluded to in this quite uncalled for examination.

"Mr. Tredgold never spoke to me of his private affairs," he said sharply. "I had nothing to do with his money or how he meant to leave it. The question was one of no interest to me."

"But, surely," said the lawyer, "you must in the course of so long an illness have heard him refer to it, make some remark on the subject—a doctor often asks, if nothing more, whether the business affairs are all in order, whether there might be something a man would wish to have looked to."

"Mr. Tredgold was a man of business, which I am not. He knew what was necessary much better than I did. I never spoke to him on business matters, nor he to me."

There was another pause, and the two city men looked at each other while Dr. Burnet buttoned up his coat significantly as a sign of departure. At last Mr. Turny with his bald head shining said persuasively, "But, you knew, he was very angry—with the girl who ran away."

"I knew only what all the world knew," said Dr. Burnet. "I am a very busy man, I have very little time to spare. If that is all you have to ask me, I must beg you to——"

"One minute," said the solicitor, "the position is very serious. It is very awkward for us to have no other member of the family, no one in Miss Tredgold's interest to talk it over with. I thought, perhaps, that you, Dr. Burnet, being I presume, by this time, an old family friend as well as——"

"I can't pretend to any such distinction," he said quickly with an angry smile, for indeed although he never showed it, he had never forgiven Katherine. Then it occurred to him, though a little late, that these personal matters might as well be kept to himself. He added quickly, "I have, of course, seen Miss Tredgold daily, for many years."

"Well," said Mr. Sturgeon, "that's always something, as she has nobody to stand by her, no relation, no husband—nothing but—what's worse than nothing," he added with a contemptuous glance at Robert Tredgold, who sat grasping his bag, and looking from one to another with curious and bewildered eyes.

Dr. Burnet grew red, and buttoned up more tightly than ever the buttons he had undone. "If I can be of any use to Miss Tredgold," he said. "Is there anything disagreeable before her—any prohibition—against helping her sister?"

"Dr. Burnet," said the solicitor imperiously, "we can find nothing among Mr. Tredgold's papers, and I have nothing, not an indication of his wishes, except the will of eighteen hundred and seventy-one."

CHAPTER XXXVII.

WHEN Katherine came into the room again at the call of her father's solicitor it was with a sense of being unduly disturbed and interfered with at a moment when she had a right to repose. She was perhaps half angry with herself that her thoughts were already turning so warmly to the future, and that Stella's approaching arrival, and the change in Stella's fortunes which it would be in her power to make, were more and more occupying the foreground of her mind, and crowding out with bright colours the sombre spectacle which was just over, and all the troublous details of the past. When a portion of one's life has been brought to an end by the closure of death, something to look forward to is the most natural and best of alleviations. It breaks up the conviction of the irrevocable, and opens to the soul once more the way before it, which, on the other hand, is closed up and ended. Katherine had allowed that thought to steal into her mind, to occupy the entire horizon. Stella was coming home, not merely back, which was all that she had allowed herself to say before, but home to her own house, or rather to that which was something still more hers than her own by being her sister's. There had been, no doubt, grievances against Stella in Katherine's mind, in the days when her own life had been entirely overshadowed by her sister's; but these were long gone, long lost in boundless, remorseful (notwithstanding that she had nothing to blame herself with) affection and longing for Stella, who after all was her only sister, her only near relation in the world. She had begun to permit herself to dwell on that delightful thought. It had been a sort of forbidden pleasure while her father lay dead in the house, and she had felt that every thought was due to him, that

she had not given him enough, had not shown that devotion to him of which one reads in books, the triumph of filial love over every circumstance. Katherine had not been to her father all that a daughter might have been, and in these dark days she had much and unjustly reproached herself with it. But now everything had been done for him that he could have wished to be done, and his image had gone aside amid the shadows of the past, and she had permitted herself to look forward, to think of Stella and her return. It was a great disturbance and annoyance to be called again, to be brought back from the contemplation of those happier things to the shadow of the grave once more—or, still worse, the shadow of business, as if she cared how much money had come to her or what was her position. There would be plenty—plenty to make Stella comfortable she knew, and beyond that what did Katherine care?

The men stood up again as she came in with an air of respect which seemed to her exaggerated and absurd—old Mr. Turny, who had known her from a child and had allowed her to open the door for him and run errands for him many a day, and the solicitor, who in his infrequent visits had never paid any attention to her at all. They stood on each side letting her pass as if into some prison of which they were going to defend the doors. Dr. Burnet, who was there too, closely buttoned and looking very grave, gave her a seat; and then she saw her Uncle Robert Tredgold sunk down in a chair, with Mr. Sturgeon's bag in his arms, staring about him with lack-lustre eyes. She gave him a little nod and encouraging glance. How small a matter it would be to provide for that unfortunate so that he should never need to carry Mr. Sturgeon's bag again! She sat down and looked round upon them with for the first time a sort of personal satisfaction in the thought that she was so wholly independent of them and all that it was in their power to do—the mistress of her own house, not obliged to think of anyone's pleasure but her own. It was on her lips to say something hospitable, kind, such as became the mistress of the house; she refrained only from the recollection that, after all, it was her father's funeral day.

"Miss Tredgold," said the solicitor, "we have now, I am sorry to say, a very painful duty to perform."

Katherine looked at him without the faintest notion of his meaning, encouraging him to proceed with a faint smile.

"I have gone through your late lamented father's papers most carefully. As you yourself said yesterday, I have possessed his confidence for many years, and all his business matters have gone through my hands. I supposed that as I had not been consulted about any change in his will, he must have employed a local solicitor. That, however, does not seem to have been the case, and I am sorry to inform you, Miss Tredgold, that the only will that can be found is that of eighteen hundred and seventy-one."

"Yes?" said Katherine indifferently interrogative, as something seemed to be expected of her.

"Yes—the will of eighteen hundred and seventy-one—nearly eight years ago—drawn out when your sister was in full possession of her empire over your late father, Miss Tredgold."

"Yes," said Katherine, but this time without any interrogation. She had a vague recollection of that will, of Mr. Sturgeon's visit to the house, and the far-off sound of stormy interviews between her father and his solicitor, of which the girls in their careless fashion, and especially Stella, had made a joke.

"You probably don't take in the full significance of what I say."

"No," said Katherine with a smile, "I don't think that I do."

"I protested against it at the time. I simply cannot comprehend it now. It is almost impossible to imagine that in present circumstances he could have intended it to stand; but here it is, and nothing else. Miss Tredgold, by this will the whole of your father's property is left over your head to your younger sister."

"To Stella!" she cried, with a sudden glow of pleasure, clapping her hands. The men about sat and stared at her, Mr. Turny in such consternation that his jaw dropped as he gazed.

Bob Tredgold was by this time beyond speech, glaring into empty space over the bag in his arms.

Then something, whether in her mind or out of it, suggested by the faces round her struck Katherine with a little chill. She looked round upon them again, and she was dimly aware that someone behind her, who could only be Dr. Burnet, made a step forward and stood behind her chair. Then she drew a long breath. "I am not sure that I understand yet. I am glad Stella has it—oh, very glad! But do you mean that I—am left out? Do you mean—— I am afraid," she said, after a pause, with a little gasp, "that is not quite just. Do you mean really everything—*everything*, Mr. Sturgeon?"

"Everything. There is, of course, your mother's money, which no one can touch, and there is a small piece of land—to build yourself a cottage on, which was all you would want, he said."

Katherine sat silent a little after this. Her first thought was that she was balked then altogether in her first personal wish, the great delight and triumph of setting Stella right and restoring to her her just share in the inheritance. This great disappointment struck her at once, and almost brought the tears to her eyes. Stella would now have it all of her own right, and would never know, or at least believe, what had been Katherine's loving intention. She felt this blow. In a moment she realised that Stella would not believe it—that she would think any assertion to that effect to be a figment, and remained fully assured that her sister would have kept everything to herself if she had had the power. And this hurt Katherine beyond expression. She would have liked to have had that power! Afterwards there came into her mind a vague sense of old injustice and unkindness to herself, the contemptuous speech about the cottage, and that this was all she would want. Her father thought so; he had thought so always, and so had Stella. It never occurred to Katherine that Stella would be anxious to do her justice, as she would have done to Stella. That was an idea that never entered her mind at all. She was thrown back eight years ago to the time when she lived habitually in the

cold shade. After all, was not that the one thing that she had been certain of all her life? Was it not a spell which had never been broken, which never could be broken? She murmured to herself dully: "A cottage—which was all I should want."

"I said to your father at the time everything that could be said." Mr. Sturgeon wanted to show his sympathy, but he felt that, thoroughly as everybody present must be persuaded that old Tredgold was an old beast, it would not do to say so in his own house on his funeral day.

The other executor said nothing except "Tchich, tchich!" but he wiped his bald head with his handkerchief and internally thanked everything that he knew in the place of God—that dark power called Providence and other such—that Katherine Tredgold had refused to have anything to say to his Fred. Dr. Burnet was not visible at all to Katherine except in a long mirror opposite, where he appeared like a shadow behind her chair.

"And this poor man," said Katherine, looking towards poor Bob Tredgold, with his staring eyes; "is there nothing for him?"

"Not a penny. I could have told you that; I have told him that often enough. I've known him from a boy. He shall keep his corner in my office all the same. I didn't put him there, though he thinks so, for his brother's sake."

"He shall have a home in the cottage—when it is built," said Katherine, with a curious smile; and then she became aware that in both these promises, the lawyer's and her own, there was a bitter tone—an unexpressed contempt for the man who was her father, and who had been laid in his grave that day.

"I hope," she said, "this is all that is necessary to-day; and may I now, if you will not think it ungracious, bid you good-bye? I shall understand it all better when I have a little time to think."

She paused, however, again after she had shaken hands with them. "There is still one thing. I am going to meet my sister when she arrives. May I have the—the happiness of

telling her? I had meant to give her half, and it is a little disappointment; but I should like at least to carry the news. Thanks; you must address to her here. Of course she will come at once here—to her own home."

She scarcely knew whose arm it was that was offered to her, but took it mechanically and went out, not quite clear as to where she was going, in the giddiness of the great change.

"This is a strange hearing," Dr. Burnet said.

"How kind of you to stand by me! Yes, it is strange; and I was pleasing myself with the idea of giving back the house and her share of everything besides to Stella. I should have liked to do that."

"It is to be hoped," he said, "that she will do the same by you."

"Oh, no!" she cried with a half laugh, "that's impossible." Then, after a pause, "you know there's a husband and children to be thought of. And what I will have is really quite enough for me."

"There is one thing at your disposal as you please," he said in a low voice. "I have not changed, Katherine, all these years."

"Dr. Burnet! It makes one's heart glad that you are so good a man!"

"Make *me* glad, that will be better," he said.

Katherine shook her head but said nothing. And human nature is so strange that Dr. Burnet, after making this profession of devotion, which was genuine enough, did not feel so sorry as he ought to have done that she still shook her head as she disappeared up the great stairs.

Katherine went into her room a very different woman from the Katherine who had left it not half-an-hour before. Then she had entertained no doubt that this was her own house in which she was, this her own room, where in all probability she would live all her life. She had intended that Stella should have the house, and yet that there should always be a nook for herself in which the giver of the whole, half by right and wholly by love, should remain, something more than a

guest. Would Stella think like that now that the tables were turned, that it was Katherine who had nothing and she all? Katherine did not for a moment imagine that this would be the case. Without questioning herself on the subject, she unconsciously proved how little confidence she had in Stella by putting away from her mind all idea of remaining here. She had no home; she would have no home unless or until the cottage was built for which her father had in mockery, not in kindness, left her the site. She looked round upon all the familiar things which had been about her all her life; already the place had taken another aspect to her. It was not hers any longer, it was a room in her sister's house. She wondered whether Stella would let her take her favourite things—a certain little cabinet, a writing table, some of the pictures. But she did not feel any confidence that Stella would allow her to do so. Stella liked to have a house nicely furnished, not to see gaps in the furniture. That was a small matter, but it was characteristic of the view which Katherine instinctively took of the whole situation. And it would be vain to say that it did not affect her. It affected her strongly, but not as the sudden deprivation of all things might be supposed to affect a sensitive mind. She had no anticipation of any catastrophe of the kind, and yet now that it had come she did not feel that she was unprepared for it. It was not a thing which her mind rejected as impossible, which her heart struggled against. Now that it had happened, it fitted in well enough to the life that had gone before.

Her father had never cared for her, and he had loved Stella. Stella was the one to whom everything naturally came. Poor Stella had been unnaturally depressed, thrown out of her triumphant place for these six years; but her father, even when he had uttered that calm execration which had so shaken Katherine's nerves but never his, had not meant any harm to Stella. He had not been able to do anything against her. Katherine remembered to have seen him seated at his bureau with that large blue envelope in his hand. This showed that he had taken the matter into consideration; but it had not

proved possible for him to disinherit Stella—a thing which everybody concluded had been done as soon as she left him. Katherine remembered vaguely even that she had seen him chuckling over that document, locking it up in his drawer as if there was some private jest of his own involved. It was the kind of jest to please Mr. Tredgold. The idea of such a discovery, of the one sister who was sure being disappointed, and the other who expected nothing being raised to the heights of triumph, all by nothing more than a scratch of his pen, was sure to please him. She could almost hear him chuckling again at her own sudden and complete overthrow. When she came thus far Katherine stopped herself suddenly with a quick flush and sense of guilt. She would not consciously blame her father, but she retained the impression on her mind of his chuckle over her discomfiture.

Thus it will be seen that Katherine's pain in the strange change was reduced by the fact that there was no injured love to feel the smart. She recognised that it was quite a thing that had been likely, though she had not thought of it before, that it was a thing that other people would recognise as likely when they heard of it. Nobody, she said to herself, would be very much surprised. It was unnatural, now she came to think of it, that she should have had even for a moment the upper hand and the extreme gratification, not to say superiority, of restoring Stella. Perhaps it was rather a mean thing to have desired it—to have wished to lay Stella under such an obligation, and to secure for herself that blessedness of giving which everybody recognised. Her mind turned with a sudden impulse of shame to this wish, that had been so strong in it. Everybody likes to give; it is a selfish sort of pleasure. You feel yourself for the moment a good genius, a sort of providence, uplifted above the person, whoever it may be, upon whom you bestow your bounty. He or she has the inferior position, and probably does not like it at all. Stella was too careless, too ready to grasp whatever she could get, to feel this very strongly; but even Stella, instead of loving her sister the better for hastening to her with her hands full, might have

resented the fact that she owed to Katherine's gift what ought to have been hers by right. It was perhaps a poor thing after all. Katherine began to convince herself that it was a poor thing—to have wished to do that. Far better that Stella should have what she had a right to by her own right and not through any gift.

Then Katherine began to try to take back the thread of the thoughts which had been in her mind before she was called downstairs to speak to those men. Her first trial resulted merely in a strong sensation of dislike to "those men" and resentment, which was absurd, for, after all, it was not they who had done it. She recalled them to her mind, or rather the image of them came into it, with a feeling of angry displeasure. Mr. Sturgeon, the solicitor, had in no way been offensive to Katherine. He had been indignant, he had been sorry, he had been, in fact, on her side; but she gave him no credit for that. And the bald head of the other seemed to her to have a sort of twinkle as of mockery in it, though, to tell the truth, poor Mr. Turny's face underneath was much troubled and almost ashamed to look at Katherine after being instrumental in doing her so much harm. She wondered with an intuitive perception whether he were not very glad now that she had refused Fred. And then with a leap her mind went back to other things. Would they all be very glad now? Would the Rector piously thank heaven, which for his good had subjected him to so small a pang, by way of saving him later from so great a disappointment? Would the doctor be glad? Even though he had made that very nice speech to her—that generous and faithful profession of attachment still—must not the doctor, too, be a little glad? And then Katherine's mind for a moment went circling back into space, as it were—into an unknown world to which she had no clue. He who had disappeared there, leaving no sign, would he ever hear, would he ever think, could it touch him one way or another? Probably it would not touch him in any way. He might be married to some woman; he might have a family of children round him. He might say, "Oh,

the Tredgolds! I used to see a good deal of them. And so Lady Somers has the money after all? I always thought that was how it would end." And perhaps he would be glad, too, that Katherine, who was the unlucky one, the one always left in the cold shade, whatever happened, had never been anything more to him than a passing fancy—a figure flitting by as in a dream.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

A WHOLE week had still to pass before the arrival of the *Aurungzebe*. After such a revolution and catastrophe as had happened, there is always a feeling in the mind that the stupendous change that is about to ensue should come at once. But it is very rare indeed that it does so. There is an inevitable time of waiting, which to some spirits clinging to the old is a reprieve, but to others an intolerable delay. Katherine was one of those to whom the delay was intolerable. She would have liked to get it all over, to deposit the treasure, as it were, at her sister's feet, and so to get away, she did not know where, and think of it no more.

She was not herself, as she now assured herself, so very badly off. The amount of her mother's fortune was about five hundred a year—quite a tolerable income for a woman alone, with nobody to think of but herself. And as Katherine had not wanted the money, or at least more than a part of it (for Mr. Tredgold had considered it right at all times that a girl with an income of her own should pay for her own dress), a considerable sum had accumulated as savings which would have been of great use to her now, and built for her that cottage to which her father had doomed her, had it not been that almost all of it had been taken during those five years past for Stella, who was always in need, and had devoured the greater part of Katherine's income besides. She had thus no nest egg, nothing to build the cottage, unless Stella paid her back, which was a probability upon which Katherine did not much reckon. It was curious, even to herself, to find that she instinctively did not reckon on Stella at all. She was even angry with herself for this, and felt that she did not do Stella justice, yet

always recurred unconsciously to the idea that there was nothing to look for, nothing to be reckoned on, but her five hundred a year, which surely, she said to herself, would be quite enough. She and old Hannah, from whom she did not wish to separate herself, could live upon that, even with a residue for poor Robert Tredgold, who had returned to his desk in the dreariest disappointment and whose living was at Mr. Sturgeon's mercy. Stella would not wish to hear of that disreputable relation, and yet perhaps she might be got to provide for him if only to secure that he should never cross her path.

Katherine's thoughts were dreary enough as she lived through these days, in the house that was no longer hers; but she had a still harder discipline to go through in the visits of her neighbours, among whom the wonderful story of Mr. Tredgold's will began to circulate at once. They had been very kind to her, according to the usual fashion of neighbourly kindness. There had been incessant visits and inquiries ever since the interest of the place had been quickened by the change for the worse in the old man's state, and on his death Katherine had received many offers of help and companionship, even from people she knew slightly. The ladies about were all anxious to be permitted to come and "sit with her," to take care of her for a day, or more than a day, to ensure her from being alone. Mrs. Shanks and Miss Mildmay, though neither of these ladies liked to disturb themselves for a common occasion, were ready at an hour's notice to have gone to her, to have been with her during the trying period of the funeral, and they were naturally among the first to enter the house when its doors were open, its shutters unbarred, and the broad light of the common day streamed once more into the rooms. Everything looked so exactly as it used to do, they remarked to each other as they went in, leaving the Midge considerably the worse for wear, and Mr. Perkins, the driver, none the better at the door. Exactly the same! The gilding of the furniture in the gorgeous drawing-room was not tarnished, nor the satin dimmed of its lustre, by Mr. Tred-

gold's death. The servants, perhaps, were a little less confident, shades of anxiety were on the countenance of the butler and the footman: they did not know whether they would be servants good enough for Lady Somers. Even Mrs. Simmons—who did not, of course, appear—was doubtful whether Lady Somers would retain her, notwithstanding all the dainties which Simmons had prepared for her youth; and a general sense of uneasiness was in the house. But the great drawing-room, with all its glow and glitter, did not show any sympathetic shadow. The two fireplaces shone with polished brass and steel, and the reflection of the blazing fires, though the windows were open—which was a very extravagant arrangement the ladies thought, though quite in the Tredgold way. And yet the old gentleman was gone! and Katherine, hitherto the dispenser of many good things and accustomed all her life to costly housekeeping, was left like any poor lady with an income of five hundred a year. Both Mrs. Shanks and Miss Mildmay, who put firebricks in their fireplaces and were very frugal in all their ways, and paid their visits in the Midge, had as much as that. No one could be expected to keep up a house of her own and a couple of servants on that. But Stella surely would do something for her sister, Mrs. Shanks said. Miss Mildmay was still shaking her head in reply to this when they entered the drawing-room, where Katherine advanced to meet them in her black dress. She had ceased to sit behind the screens in that part of the room which she had arranged for herself. The screens were folded back, the room was again one large room all shining with its gilded chairs and cabinets, its Florentine tables, its miles of glowing Aubusson carpet. She was the only blot upon its brightness, with her heavy crape and her pale face.

"My dear Katherine, my dearest Katherine," the old ladies said, enfolding her one after the other in the emphatic silence of a long embrace. This was meant to express something more than words could say—and, indeed, there were few words which could have adequately expressed the feelings of the spectators. "So your old brute of a father has gone at

last, and a good riddance, and has cheated you out of every penny he could take away from you, after making a slave of you all these years!" Such words as these would have given but a feeble idea of the feelings of these ladies, but it is needless to say that it would have been impossible to say them except in some as yet undiscovered Palace of Truth. But each old lady held the young one fast, and pressed a long kiss upon her cheek, which answered the same purpose. When she emerged from these embraces Katherine looked a little relieved, but still more pale.

"Katherine, my dear, it is impossible not to speak of it," said Mrs. Shanks; "you know it must be in our minds all the while. Are you going to do anything, my dear child, to dispute this dreadful will?"

"Jane Shanks and I," said Miss Mildmay, "have talked of nothing else since we heard of it; not that I believe you will do anything against it, but I wish you had a near friend who would, Katherine. A near friend is the thing. I have never been very much in favour of marrying, but I should like you to marry for that."

"In order to dispute my father's will?" said Katherine. "Dear Miss Mildmay, you know I don't want to be rude, but I will not even hear it discussed."

"But Katherine, Katherine——"

"Please not a word! I am quite satisfied with papa's will. I had intended to do—something of the sort myself, if I had ever had the power. You know, which is something pleasanter to talk of, that the *Aurungzebe* has been signalled, and I am going to meet Stella to-morrow."

The two old ladies looked at each other. "And I suppose," said Mrs. Shanks, "you will bring her home here."

"Stella has seen a great deal since she was here," said Miss Mildmay, "I should not think she would come, Katherine, if that is what you wish. She will like something more in the fashion—or perhaps more out of the fashion—in the grand style, don't you know, like her husband's old house. She will turn up her nose at all this, and at all of us, and perhaps

at you too. Stella was never like you, Katherine. If she falls into a great fortune all at once there will be no bounds to her. She'll probably sell this place, and turn you out."

"She may not like the place, and neither do I," said Katherine like a flash; "if she wishes to part with it I shall certainly not oppose her. You must not speak so of my sister."

"And what shall you do, Katherine, my dear?"

"I am going away," cried Katherine; "I have always intended to go away. I have a piece of land to build a cottage on." She made a pause, for she had never in words stated her intentions before. "Papa knew what I should like," she said, with the rising of a sob in her throat. The sense of injury now and then overcame even her self-control. "In the meantime perhaps we may go abroad, Hannah and I; isn't it always the right thing when you are in mourning and trouble to go abroad?"

"My dear girl," said Miss Mildmay solemnly, "how far do you think you can go abroad you and your maid—upon five hundred a year?"

"Can't we?" said Katherine, confused; "oh, yes, we have very quiet ways. I am not extravagant, I shall want no carriage or anything."

"Do you know how much a hotel costs, Katherine? You and your maid couldn't possibly live for less than a pound a day—a pound a day means three hundred and sixty-five pounds a year—and that without a pin, without a shoe, without a bit of ribbon or a button for your clothes, still less with anything new to put on. How could you go abroad on that? It is impossible—and with the ideas you have been brought up on, everything so extravagant and ample—I can't imagine what you can be thinking of, a practical girl like you."

"She might go to a pension, Ruth Mildmay. Pensions are much cheaper than hotels."

"I think I see Katherine in a pension! With a napkin done up in a ring to last a week, and tablecloths to match!"

"Well then," said Katherine, with a feeble laugh, "if that

is so I must stay at home. Hannah and I will find a little house somewhere while my cottage is building."

"Hannah can never do all the work of a house," said Miss Mildmay, "Hannah has been accustomed to her ease as well as you. You would need at least a good maid of all work who could cook, besides Hannah; and then there are rent and taxes, and hundreds of things that you never calculate upon. You could not live, my dear, even in a cottage with two maids, on five hundred a year."

"I think I had better not live at all!" cried Katherine, "if that is how it is; and yet there must be a great many people who manage very well on less than I have. Why, there are families who live on a pound a week!"

"But not, my dear, with a lady's maid and another," Miss Mildmay said.

Katherine was very glad when her friends went away. They would either of them have received her into their own little houses with delight, for a long visit—even with her maid, who, as everybody knows, upsets a little house much more than the mistress. She might have sat for a month at a time in either of the drawing-rooms under the green verandah, and looked out upon the terrace gardens with the sea beyond, and thus have been spared so much expense, a consideration which would have been fully in the minds of her entertainers; but their conversation gave her an entirely new view of the subject. Her little income had seemed to her to mean plenty, even luxury. She had thought of travelling. She had thought (with a little bitterness, yet amusement) of the cottage she would build, a dainty little nest full of pretty things. It had never occurred to her that she would not have money enough for all that, or that poor old Hannah if she accompanied her mistress would have to descend from the pleasant leisure to which she was accustomed. This new idea was not a pleasant one. She tried to cast it away and to think that she would not care, but the suggestion that even such a thing as the little drawing-room, shadowed by the verandah, was above her reach gave her undeniably a shock. It was not a pretty room;

in the winter it was dark and damp, the shabby carpet on a level with the leaf-strewn flags of the verandah and the flower borders beyond. She had thought with compassion of the inhabitants trying to be cheerful on a dull wintry day in the corner between the window and the fire. And yet that was too fine—too expensive for her now. Mrs. Shanks had two maids and a boy! and could have the Midge when she liked in partnership with her friend. These glories could not be for Katherine. Then she burst into a laugh of ridicule at herself. Other women of her years in all the villages about were working cheerfully for their husbands and babies, washing the clothes and cooking the meals, busy and happy all day long. Katherine could have done that she felt—but she did not know how she was to vegetate cheerfully upon her five hundred a year. To be sure, as the reader will perceive, who may here be indignant with Katherine, she knew nothing about it, and was not so grateful as she ought to be for what she had in comparison with what she had not.

Lady Jane came to see her the same day, and Lady Jane was over-awed altogether by the news. She had a scared look in her face. "I can only hope that Stella will show herself worthy of our confidence and put things right between you at once," she said; but her face did not express the confidence which she put into words. She asked all about the arrival, and about Katherine's purpose of meeting her sister at Gravesend. "Shall you bring them all down here?" she said.

"It will depend upon Stella. I should like to bring them all here. I have had our old rooms prepared for the nurseries; and there are fires everywhere to air the house. They will feel the cold very much, I suppose. But if the fine weather lasts——. There is only one thing against it, Stella may not care to come."

"Oh, Stella will come," said Lady Jane, "the island is the right place, don't you know, to have a house in, and everybody she used to know will see her here in her glory—and then her husband will be able to run up to town—and begin to squander the money away. Charlie Somers is my own rela-

tion, Katherine, but I don't put much faith in him. I wish it had been as we anticipated, and everything had been in your hands."

"You know what I should have done at once, Lady Jane, if it had——"

"I know—not this, however, anyhow. I hope you would have had sense enough to keep your share. It would have been far better in the long run for Stella, she would always have had you to fall back upon. My heart is broken about it all, Katherine. I blame myself now more than at the first. I should never have countenanced them; and I never should if I had thought it would bring disaster upon you."

"You need not blame yourself, Lady Jane, for this was the will of '71; and if you had never interfered at all, if there had been no Charles Somers, and no elopement, it would have been just the same."

"There is something in that," Lady Jane said. "And now I hope, I do hope, that Stella—she is not like you, my dear Katherine. She has never been brought up to think of any one but herself."

"She has been brought up exactly as I was," Katherine said with a smile.

"Ah yes, but it is different, quite different; the foolish wicked preference which was shown for her, did good to you—you are a different creature, and most likely it is more or less owing to that. Katherine, you know there are things in which I think you were wrong. When that good, kind man wanted to marry you, as indeed he does now——"

"Not very much, I think, Lady Jane; which is all the better, as I do not wish at all to marry him."

"I think you are making a mistake," said Lady Jane. "He is not so ornamental perhaps as Charlie Somers, but he is a far better man. Well, then, I suppose there is nothing more to be said; but I can't help thinking that if you had a man to stand by you they would never have propounded that will."

"Indeed," said Katherine, "you must not think they had

anything to do with it; the will was propounded because it was the only one that was there."

"I know that women always are imposed upon in business, where it is possible to do it," Lady Jane said in tones of conviction. And it was with great reluctance that she went away, still with a feeling that it was somehow Katherine's fault, if not at bottom her own, for having secretly encouraged Stella's runaway match. "She had never thought of this," she declared, for a moment. She had been strongly desirous that Stella should have her share, and she knew that Katherine would have given her her share. As for Stella's actions, no one could answer for them. She might have a generous impulse or she might not; and Charlie Somers, he was always agape for money. If he had the Duke of Westminster's revenues he would still open his mouth for more. "But you may be sure I shall put their duty very plainly before them," she said.

"Oh, don't, please don't," cried Katherine. "I do not want to have anything from Stella's pity—I am not to be pitied at all. I have a very sufficient income of my own."

"A very sufficient income—for Mr. Tredgold's daughter!" cried Lady Jane, and she hurried away biting her lips to prevent a string of evil names as long as her arm bursting from them. The old wretch! the old brute! the old curmudgeon! were a few of the things she would have liked to say. But it does not do to scatter such expressions about a man's house before he has been buried a week. These are decorums which are essential to the very preservation of life.

Then Katherine's mind turned to the other side of the question, and she thought of herself as Stella's pensioner, of living on sufferance in Stella's house, with a portion of Stella's money substracted from the rest for her benefit. It would have been just the same had it been she who had endowed Stella, as she had intended, and given her the house and the half of the fortune. The same, and yet how different. Stella would have taken everything her sister had given, and waited and craved for more. But to Katherine it seemed impossible

that she should take anything from Stella. It would be charity, alms, a hundred ugly things; it would have been mere and simple justice, as she would have felt it had the doing of it been in her own hands.

But it was not with any of these feelings, it was with the happiness of real affection in seeing her sister again, and the excitement of a great novelty and change and of a new chapter of life quite different from all that she had known before, and probably better, more happy; more comforting than any of her anticipations, that she set out next day to meet Stella and to bring her home.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

A RIVER-SEA between two widely-separated banks, so calm that it was like a sea of oil bulging towards the centre from over-fullness; a big ship upon an even keel, moving along with almost imperceptible progress, the distant hazy banks gliding slowly past; the ease and relief of a long voyage over, not only on every face, but on every line of cordage; a bustle of happy people rushing up upon deck to see how near home they were, and of other people below crowding, bustling over portmanteaux to be packed, and all the paraphernalia of the voyage to be put away. It was a very curious scene to Katherine's eyes, not to speak of the swarming dark figures everywhere—the Lascars, who were the crew, the gliding ayhas in their white wrappings. She was led to the cabin in which Stella, half-dressed, was standing in the midst of piles of clothes and other belongings, all thrown about in a confusion which it seemed impossible ever to reduce to order, with a box or two open and ready to receive the mass which never could be got in. She was so busy that she could not at first be got to understand that somebody from shore had come for her. And even then, though she gave a little cry and made a little plunge at Katherine, it was in the midst of a torrent of directions, addressed sometimes in English, sometimes in Hindostanee, to an English maid and a Hindoo woman who encumbered the small cabin with their presence. A pink-and-white—yet more white than pink—baby lay sprawling, half out of its garments, upon the red velvet steamboat couch. Katherine stood confused, disappointed, longing to take her sister to her heart, and longing to snatch up the little creature who was so new and so strange

an element, yet suddenly caught, stopped, set down, in the exaltation of her love and eagerness by the deadly commonplace of the scene. Stella cried, with almost a shriek:

"You, Katherine! Is it possible?" and gave her a hurried kiss; and then, without drawing breath, called out to the women: "For goodness' sake take care what you're doing. That's my best lace. And put all the muslins at the bottom—I sha'n't want them here," with a torrent of other directions in a strange tongue to the white-robed ayah in the background. Then—"Only wait," Stella cried, "till I get a dress on. But there is never anything ready when I want it. Give me that gown—any gown—and look sharp, can't you? I am never ready till half an hour after everybody. I never can get a thing to put on."

"Don't mind for to-day, Stella; anything will do for to-day. I have so much to tell you."

"Oh!" said Stella, looking at her again, "I see. Your crape's enough, Kate, without a word. So it's all over? Well, perhaps it is for the best. It would have made me miserable if he had refused to see me. And Charlie would have insisted—and—— Poor papa! so he's gone—really gone. Give me a handkerchief, quick! I was, of course, partly prepared. It's not such a shock as it might have been." A tear fell from Stella's eyes upon the dress which her maid was arranging. She wiped it off carefully, and then her eyes. "You see how careful I have to be now-a-days," she said; "I can't have my dress spotted, I haven't too many of them *now*. Poor papa! Well, it is a good thing it has happened when I have all the distractions of the journey to take off my mind. Have you done now fumbling? Pin my veil properly. Now I'll go on deck with you, Katherine, and we'll watch the ship getting in, and have our talk."

"Mayn't I kiss the baby first?" Katherine said. She had been looking at that new and wonderful thing over the chaos of the baggage, unable to get further than the cabin door.

"Oh, you'll see the baby after. Already you're beginning to think of the baby and not of me. I knew that was how it

would be," said Stella, pettishly. She stepped over an open box, dragging down a pile of muslins as she moved. "There's no room to turn round here. Thank heaven we've done with it at last. Now, Kate—Kate, tell me; it will be the first thing Charlie will want to know. Did he relent to me at the last?"

"There is so much to tell you, Stella."

"Yes—yes—about his illness and all. Poor papa! I am sure I am just as sorry as if I knew all about it already. But Kate, dear, just one word. Am I cut off in the will? That is what I want to know."

"No," said Katherine, "you are not cut off in the will."

"Hurrah!" cried Stella, clapping her hands. It was but for one second, and then she quieted down. "Oh, we have had such a time," she cried, "and Charlie always insinuating, when he didn't say it outright, that it was my fault, for, of course, we never, never believed, neither he nor I, that papa would have held out. And so he did come to at the end? Well, it is very hard, very hard to have been kept out of it so long; but I am glad we are to have what belongs to us now. Oh—h!" cried Stella, drawing a long breath as she emerged on deck, leading the way, "here's the old Thames again, bless it, and the fat banks; and we're at home, and have come into our money. Hurrah!"

"What are you so pleased about, Lady Somers? The first sight of ugly old England and her grey skies," said someone who met them. The encounter sobered Stella, who paused a moment with a glance from her own coloured dress to Katherine's crape, and a sudden sense of the necessities of the position.

"They aren't very much to be pleased about, are they?" she said. "Will you find Charlie for me, please. Tell him my sister has come to meet us, and that there's news which he will like to hear."

"Stella," cried Katherine, "there may not be much sorrow in your heart, yet I don't think you should describe your own father's death as something your husband will like to hear."

"It is not papa's death, bless you," cried Stella, lightly.

"Oh, look, they are getting out the ropes. We shall soon be there now—it is the money, to be sure. You have never been hard up for money, Kate, or you would know what it was. Look, there's Charlie on the bridge with little Job; we call him Job because he's always been such a peepy-weepy little fellow, always crying and cross for nothing at all; they say it was because I was in such a temper and misery when he was coming, about having no money, and papa's cruelty. Charlie! That silly man has never found him, though he might have known he was on the bridge. Cha—arlie!" Stella made a tube of her two hands and shouted, and Katherine saw a tall man on the bridge over their heads turn and look down. He did not move, however, for some minutes till Stella's gestures seemed to have awakened his curiosity. He came down then, very slowly, leading with much care an extremely small child, so small that it was curious to see him on his legs at all, who clung to his hand, and whom he lifted down the steep ladder stairs.

"Well," he said, "what's the matter now?" when he came within speaking distance. Katherine had scarcely known her sister's husband in the days of his courtship. She had not seen him more than three or four times, and his image had not remained in her mind. She saw now a tall man a little the worse for wear, with a drooping moustache, and lips which drooped, too, at the corners under the moustache, with a look which was slightly morose—the air of a discontented, perhaps disappointed, man. His clothes were slightly shabby, perhaps because they were old clothes worn for the voyage, his hair and moustache had that rusty dryness which comes to hair which does not grow grey, and which gives a shabby air, also as of old clothes, to those natural appendages. The only attractive point about him was the child, the very, very small child which seemed to walk between his feet—so close did it cling to him, and so very low down.

"Nothing's the matter," said Stella. "Here is Kate come to bid us welcome home."

"O—oh," he said, and lifted his limp hat by the crown; "it's a long time since we have met; I don't know that I

should have recognised you." His eyes went from her hat to her feet with a curious inspection of her dress.

"Yes," said Katherine, "you are right; it is so. My father is dead."

A sudden glimmer sprang into his eyes and a redness to his face; it was as if some light had flashed up over them; he gave his wife a keen look. But decorum seemed more present with him than with Stella. He did not put any question. He said mechanically, "I am sorry," and stood waiting, giving once more a glance at his wife.

"All Kate has condescended to tell me," said Stella, "is that I am not out of the will. That's the great thing, isn't it? How much there's for us she doesn't say, but there's something for us. Tell him, Kate."

"There is a great deal for you," Katherine said, quietly, "and a great deal to say and to tell you; but it is very public and very noisy here."

The red light glowed up in Somers' face. He lifted instinctively, as it seemed, the little boy at his feet into his arms, as if to control and sober himself. "We owe this," he said, "no doubt to you, Miss Tredgold."

"You would have owed it to me had it been in my power," said Katherine, with one little flash of self-assertion, "but as it happens," she added hastily, "you do not owe anything to me. Stella will be as rich as her heart can desire. Oh, can't we go somewhere out of this noise, where I can tell you, Stella? Or, if we cannot, wait please, wait for the explanations. You have it; isn't that enough? And may I not make acquaintance with the children? And oh, Stella, haven't you a word for me?"

Stella turned round lightly and putting her arms round Katherine kissed her on both cheeks. "You dear old thing!" she said. And then, disengaging herself, "I hope you ordered me some mourning, Kate. How can I go anywhere in this coloured gown? Not to say that it is quite out of fashion and shabby besides. I suppose I must have crape—not so deep as yours, though, which is like a widow's mourning. But crape

is becoming to a fair complexion. Oh, he won't have anything to say to you, don't think it. He is a very cross, bad-tempered, uncomfortable little boy."

"Job fader's little boy," said the pale little creature perched upon his father's shoulder and dangling his small thin legs on Somers' breast. He would indeed have nothing to say to Katherine's overtures. When she put out her arms to him he turned round, and, clasping his arms round his father's head, hid his own behind it. Meanwhile a look of something which looked like vanity—a sort of sublimated self-complacence—stole over Sir Charles' face. He was very fond of the child; also, he was very proud of the fact that the child preferred him to everybody else in the world.

It was with the most tremendous exertion that the party at last was disembarked, the little boy still on his father's shoulder, the baby in the arms of the ayah. The countless packages and boxes, which to the last moment the aggrieved and distracted maid continued to pack with items forgotten, came slowly to light one after another, and were disposed of in the train, or at least on shore. Stella had forgotten everything except the exhilaration of knowing that she had come into her fortune as she made her farewells all round. "Oh, do you know? We have had great news; we have come into our money," she told several of her dearest friends. She was in a whirl of excitement, delight, and regrets. "We have had such a good time, and I'm so sorry to part; you must come and see us," she said to one after another. Everybody in the ship was Stella's friend. She had not done anything for them, but she had been good-humoured and willing to please, and she was Stella! This was Katherine's involuntary reflection as she stood like a shadow watching the crowd of friends, the goodbyes and hopes of future meeting, the kisses of the ladies and close hand-clasping of the men. Nobody was so popular as Stella. She was Stella, she was born to please; wherever she went, whatever she did, it was always the same. Katherine felt proud of her sister and subdued by her, and a little amused at the same time. Stella—with her husband by her

side, the pale baby crowing in its dark nurse's arms, and the little boy clinging round his father, the worried English maid, the serene white-robed ayah, the soldier-servant curt and wooden, expressing no feeling, and the heaps of indiscriminate baggage which formed a sort of entrenchment round her—was a far more important personage than Katherine could ever be. Stella did not require the wealth which was now to be poured down at her feet to make her of consequence. Without it, in her present poverty, was she not the admired of all beholders—the centre of a world of her own? Her sister looked on with a smile, with a certain admiration, half pleased with the impartiality (after all) of the world, half jarred by the partiality of nature. Her present want of wealth did not discredit Stella, but nature somehow discredited Katherine and put her aside, whatever her qualities might be. She looked on without any active feeling in these shades of sentiment, neutral tinted, like the sky and the oily river, and the greyness of the air, with a thread of interest and amusement running through, as if she were looking on at the progress of a story—a story in which the actors interested her, but in which there was no close concern of her own.

"Kate!" she heard Stella call suddenly, her voice ringing out (she had never had a low voice) over the noise and bustle. "Kate, I forgot to tell you, here's an old friend of yours. There she is, there she is, Mr.—. Go and speak to her for yourself."

Katherine did not hear the name, and had not an idea who the old friend was. She turned round with a faint smile on her face.

Well! There was nothing wonderful in the fact that he had come home with them. He had, it turned out afterwards, taken his passage in the *Aurungzebe* without knowing that the Somers were going by it, or anything about them. It would be vain to deny that Katherine was startled, but she did not cling to anything for support, nor—except by a sudden change of colour, for which she was extremely angry with herself—betray any emotion. Her heart gave a jump, but then it be-

came quite quiet again. "We seem fated to meet in travelling," she said, "and nowhere else." Afterwards she was very angry with herself for these last words. She did not know why she said them—to round off her sentence perhaps, as a writer often puts in words which he does not precisely mean. They seemed to convey a complaint or a reproach which she did not intend at all.

"I have been hoping," he said, "since ever I knew your sister was on board that perhaps you might come, but——" He looked at Katherine in her mourning, and then over the crowd to Stella, talking, laughing, full of spirit and movement. "I was going to say that I—feared some sorrow had come your way, but when I look at Lady Somers——"

"It is that she does not realise it," said Katherine. "It is true—my father is dead."

He stood looking at her again, his countenance changing from red to brown (which was now its natural colour). He seemed to have a hundred things to say, but nothing would come to his lips. At last he stammered forth, with a little difficulty it appeared, "I am—sorry—that anything could happen to bring sorrow to you."

Katherine only answered him with a little bow. He was not sorry, nor was Stella sorry, nor anyone else involved. She felt with a keen compunction that to make up for this universal satisfaction over her father's death she ought to be sorry—more sorry than words could say.

"It makes a great difference in my life," she said simply, and while he was still apparently struggling for something to say, the Somers party got into motion and came towards the gangway, by which most of the passengers had now landed. The little army pushed forward, various porters first with numberless small packets and bags, then the man and worried maid with more, then the ayah with the baby, then Lady Somers, who caught Katherine by the arm and pushed through with her, putting her sister in front, with the tall figure of the husband and the little boy seated on his shoulder bringing up the rear. Job's little dangling legs were on a level with Stanford's

shoulder, and kicked him with a friendly farewell as they passed, while Job's father stretched out a large hand and said, "Goodbye, old fellow; we're going to the old place in the Isle of Wight. Look us up some time." Katherine heard these words as she landed, with Stella's hand holding fast to her arm. She was amused, too, faintly to hear her sister's husband's instant adoption of the old place in the Isle of Wight. Sir Charles did not as yet know any more than that Stella was not cut off, that a great deal was coming to her. Stella had not required any further information. She had managed to say to him that of course to go to the Cliff would be the best thing, now that it was Katherine's. It would be a handy headquarters and save money, and not be too far from town.

The party was not fatigued as from an inland journey. They had all bathed and breakfasted in such comfort as a steamship affords, so that there was no need for any delay in proceeding to their journey's end. And the bustle and the confusion, and the orders to the servants, and the arrangements about the luggage, and the whining of Job on his father's shoulder, and the screams of the baby when it was for a moment moved from its nurse's arms, and the sharp remarks of Sir Charles and the continual talk of Stella—so occupied every moment that Katherine found herself at home again with this large and exigent party before another word on the important subject which was growing larger and larger in her mind could be said.

CHAPTER XL.

THE evening passed in a whirl, such as Katherine, altogether unused to the strange mingled life of family occupations and self-indulgence, could not understand. There was not a tranquil moment for the talk and the explanations. Stella ran from room to room, approving and objecting. She liked the state apartment with its smart furniture in which she had herself been placed, but she did not like the choice of the rooms for the babies, and had them transferred to others, and the furniture altered and pulled about to suit their needs. The house had put on a gala air for the new guests; there were fires blazing everywhere, flowers everywhere, such as could be got at that advanced season. Stella sent the chrysanthemums away, which were the chief point in the decorations. "They have such a horrid smell. They make my head ache—they remind me," she said, "of everything that's dreadful." And she stood over the worried maid while she opened the boxes, dragging out the dresses by a corner and flinging them about on the floors. "I shall not want any of those old things. Isn't there a rag of a black that I can wear now? Kate, you were dreadfully remiss not to order me some things. How can I go downstairs and show myself in all my blues and greens? Oh, yes, of course I require to be fitted on, but I'd rather have an ill-fitting gown than none at all. I could wear one of yours, it is true, but my figure is different from yours. I'm not all one straight line from head to foot, as you are; and you're covered over with crape, which is quite unnecessary—nobody thinks of such a thing now. I'll wear *that*," she added, giving a little kick to a white dress, which was one of those she had dragged out by a flounce and flung on

the floor. "You can put some black ribbons to it, Pearson. Oh, how glad I shall be to get rid of all those old things, and get something fit to wear, even if it's black. I shall telegraph at once to London to send someone down about my things to-morrow, but I warn you I'm not going to wear mourning for a whole year, Kate. No one thinks of such a thing now."

"You always look well in black, my lady, with your complexion," said Pearson, the maid.

"Well, perhaps I do," said Stella mollified. "Please run down and send off the telegram, Kate; there is such a crowd of things to do."

And thus the day went on. At dinner there was perforce a little time during which the trio were together; but then the servants were present, making any intimate conversation impossible, and the talk that was was entirely about the dishes, which did not please either Sir Charles or his wife. Poor Mrs. Simmons, anxious to please, had with great care compounded what she called and thought to be a curry, upon which both of them looked with disgust. "Take it away," they both said, after a contemptuous examination of the dish, turning over its contents with the end of a fork, one after the other. "Kate, why do you let that woman try things she knows nothing about?" said Stella severely. "But you never eat what you eat, and you think that's fine, I know. Old Simmons never could do much but what English people call roast and boil—what any savage could do! and you've kept her on all these years! I suppose you have eaten meekly whatever she chose to set before you ever since I went away."

"I think," said Sir Charles in his moustache, "if I am to be here much there will certainly have to be a change in the cook."

"You can do what you please, Stella—as soon as everything is settled," Katherine said. Her sister had taken her place without any question at the head of the table; and Somers, perhaps unconsciously, had placed himself opposite. Katherine had taken with some surprise and a momentary

hesitation a seat at the side, as if she were their guest—which indeed she was, she said to herself. But she had never occupied that place before; even in the time of Stella's undoubted ascendancy, Katherine had always sat at the head of the table. She felt this as one feels the minor pricks of one's great troubles. After dinner, when she had calculated upon having time for her explanation, Sir Charles took out his cigar case before the servants had left the room. Stella interrupted him with a little scream. "Oh, Charles, Kate isn't used to smoke! She will be thinking of her curtains and all sorts of things."

"If Kate objects, of course," he said, cutting the end off his cigar and looking up from the operation.

Katherine objected, as many women do, not to the cigar but to the disrespect. She said, "Stella is mistress. I take no authority upon me," with as easy an air as she could assume.

"Come along and see the children," Stella cried, jumping up, "you'll like that, or else you'll pretend to like it," she said as they went out of the room together, "to please me. Now, you needn't trouble to please me in that way. I'm not silly about the children. There they are, and one has to make the best of them, but it's rather hard to have the boy a teeny weeny thing like Job. The girl's strong enough, but it don't matter so much for a girl. And Charlie is an idiot about Job. Ten to one he will be upstairs as soon as we are, snatching the little wretch out of his bed and carrying him off. They sit and croon for hours together when there's no one else to amuse Charlie. And I'm sure I don't know what is to become of him, for there will be nobody to amuse him here."

"But it must be so bad for the child, Stella. How can he be well if you allow that to go on?"

"Oh," cried Stella, clapping her hands, "I knew you would be the very model of a maiden aunt! Now you've found your real *rôle* in life, Kate. But don't go crossing the ayah, for she won't understand you, and you'll come to dreadful grief. Oh, the children! We should only disturb them if

we went in. I said that for an excuse to get you away. Come into my room, and let's look over my clothes. I am sure I have a black gown somewhere. There was a royal mourning, don't you know, and I had to get one in a hurry to go to Government House in—unless Pearson has taken it for herself. Black is becoming to my complexion, I know—but I don't like it all the same—it shows every mark, and it's hot, and if you wear crape it should always be quite fresh. This of yours is crumpled a little. You'll look like an old woman from the workhouse directly if you wear crumpled crape—it is the most expensive, the most——”

“You need not mind that now, Stella; and for papa's sake——”

“Good gracious! what a thing that is to say! I need never mind it! Charlie will say I should always mind it. He says no income could stand me. Are you there, Pearson? Well, it is just as well she isn't; we can look them over at our ease without her greedy eyes watching what she is to have. She'll have to get them all, I suppose, for they will be old-fashioned before I could put them on again. Look here,” cried Stella, opening the great wardrobe and pulling down in the most careless way the things which the maid had placed there. She flung them on the floor as before, one above the other. “This is one I invented myself,” she said. “Don't you think that grey with the silver is good? It had a great *success*. They say it looked like moonlight. By the bye,” she added, “that might come in again. Grey with silver is mourning! What a good thing I thought of that! It must have been an inspiration. I've only worn it once, and it's so fantastic it's independent of the fashion. It will come in quite well again.”

“Stella, I do wish you would let me tell you how things are, and how it all happened, and——”

“Yes, yes,” cried Lady Somers, “another time! Here's one, again, that I've only worn once; but that will be of no use, for it's pink—unless we could make out somehow that it was mauve, there is very little difference—a sort of blue shade cast upon it, which might be done by a little draping, and it

would make such a pretty mauve. There is very little difference between the two, only mauve is mourning and pink is—frivolity, don't you know. Oh, Pearson, here you are! I suppose you have been down at your supper? What you can do to keep you so long at your supper I never can tell. I suppose you flirt with all the gentlemen in the servants' hall. Look here, don't you think this pink, which I have only worn once, could be made with a little trouble to look mauve? I am sure it does already a little by this light."

"It is a very bright rose-pink, my lady," said Pearson, not at all disposed to see one of the freshest of her mistress's dresses taken out of her hands.

"You say that because you think you will get it for yourself," said Lady Somers, "but I am certain with a little blue carefully arranged to throw a shade it would make a beautiful mauve."

"Blue-and-pink are the Watteau mixture," said Pearson, holding her ground, "which is always considered the brightest thing you can wear."

"Oh, if you are obstinate about it!" cried the mistress. "But recollect I am not at your mercy here, Pearson, and I shall refer it to Louise. Kate, I'm dreadfully tired; I think I'll go to bed. Remember I haven't been on solid ground for ever so long. I feel the motion of the boat as if I were going up and down. You do go on feeling it, I believe, for weeks after. Take off this tight dress, Pearson, quick, and let me get to bed."

"Shall I sit by you a little after, and tell you, Stella?"

"Oh goodness, no! Tell me about a death and all that happened, in the very same house where it was, to make me nervous and take away my rest! You quite forget that I am delicate, Kate! I never could bear the things that you, a great, robust, middle-aged woman, that have never had any drain on your strength, can go through. Do let me have a quiet night, my first night after a sea voyage. Go and talk to Charlie, if you like, he has got no nerves; and Pearson, put the lemonade by my bed, and turn down the light."

Katherine left her sister's room with the most curious sensations. She was foiled at every point by Stella's lightness, by her self-occupation, the rapidity of her loose and shallow thoughts, and their devotion to one subject. She recognised in a half-angry way the potency and influence of this self-occupation. It was so sincere that it was almost interesting. Stella found her own concerns full of interest; she had no amiable delusions about them. She spoke out quite simply what she felt, even about her children. She did not claim anything except boundless indulgence for herself. And then it struck Katherine very strangely, it must be allowed, to hear herself described as a great, robust, middle-aged woman. Was that how Stella saw her—was she *that*, probably, to other people? She laughed a little to herself, but it was not a happy laugh. How misguided was the poet when he prayed that we might see ourselves as others see us! Would not that be a dreadful coming down to almost everybody, even to the fairest and the wisest. The words kept flitting through Katherine's mind without any will of hers. "A great, robust, middle-aged woman!" She passed a long mirror in the corridor (there were mirrors everywhere in Mr. Tredgold's much decorated house), and started a little involuntarily to see the slim black figure in it gliding forward as if to meet her. Was this herself, Katherine, or was it the ghost of what she had thought she was, a girl at home, although twenty-nine? After all, middle-age does begin with the thirties, Katherine said to herself. Dante was thirty-five only when he described himself as at the *mezzo del cammin*. Perhaps Stella was right. She was three years younger. As she went towards the stairs occupied by these thoughts, she suddenly saw Sir Charles, a tall shadow, still more ghost-like than herself, in the mirror, with a little white figure seated on his shoulder. It was the little Job, the delicate boy, his little feet held in his father's hand to keep them warm, his arms clinging round his father's head as he sat upon his shoulder. Katherine started when she came upon the group, and made out the little boy's small face and staring eyes up on those heights. Her brother-in-law greeted her with

a laugh: "You wouldn't stop with me to smoke a cigar, so I have found a companion who never objects. You like the smoke, don't you, Job?"

"Job fader's little boy," said the small creature, in a voice with a shiver in it.

"Put a shawl round him, at least," cried Katherine, going hastily to a wardrobe in the corridor; "the poor little man is cold."

"Not a bit, are you, Job, with your feet in father's hand?"

"Indland," said the child, with a still more perceptible shiver, "Indland's cold."

But he tried to kick at Katherine as she approached to put the shawl round him, which Sir Charles stooped to permit, with an instinct of politeness.

"What, kick at a lady!" cried Sir Charles, giving the child a shake. "But we are not used to all these punctilios. We shall do very well, I don't fear."

"It is very bad for the child—indeed, he ought to be asleep," Katherine could not but say. She felt herself the maiden aunt, as Stella had called her, the robust middle-aged woman—a superannuated care-taking creature who did nothing but interfere.

"Oh, we'll look after that, Job and I," the father said, going on down the stairs without even the fictitious courtesy of waiting till Katherine should pass. She stood and watched them going towards the drawing-room, the father and child. The devotion between them was a pretty sight—no doubt it was a pretty sight. The group of the mother and child is the one group in the world which calls forth human sentiment everywhere; and yet the father and child is more moving, more pathetic still, to most, certainly to all feminine, eyes. It seems to imply more—a want in the infant life to which its mother is not first, a void in the man's. Is it that they seem to cling to each other for want of better? But that would be derogatory to the father's office. At all events it is so. Katherine's heart melted at this sight. The poor little child uncared for in the midst of so much ease, awake with his big

excited eyes when he ought to have been asleep, exposed to the cold to which he was unaccustomed, shivering yet not complaining, his father carrying him away to comfort his own heart—negligent, but not intentionally so, of the child's welfare, holding him as his dearest thing in the world. The ayah, on hearing the sound of voices, came to the door of the room, expostulating largely in her unknown tongue, gesticulating, appealing to the unknown lady. "He catch death—cold," she cried, and Katherine shook her head as she stood watching them, the child recovering his spirits in the warmth of the shawl, his little laugh sounding through the house. Oh, how bad it was for little Job! and yet the conjunction was so touching that it went to her heart. She hesitated for a moment. What would be the use of following them, of endeavouring through Sir Charles' cigar and Job's chatter to give her brother-in-law the needful information, joyful though it must be. She did not understand these strange, eager, insouciant, money-grasping, yet apparently indifferent people, who were satisfied with her curt intimation of their restoration to wealth, even though they were forever, as Lady Jane said, agape for more. She stood for a moment hesitating, and then she turned away in the other direction to her own room, and gave it over for the night.

But Katherine's cares were not over; in her room she found Mrs. Simmons waiting for her, handkerchief in hand, with her cap a little awry and her eyes red with crying. "I'm told, Miss Katherine," said Simmons with a sniff, "as Miss Stella, which they calls her ladyship, don't think nothing of my cookin', and says I'm no better than a savage. I've bin in this house nigh upon twenty years, and my things always liked, and me trusted with everything; and that's what I won't take from no one, if it was the Lord Chamberlain himself. I never thought to live to hear myself called a savage—and it's what I can't put up with, Miss Katherine—not to go again you. I wouldn't cross you not for no money. I've 'ad my offers, both for service and for publics, and other things. Mr. Harrison, the butler, he have been very pressin'—but I've

said just this, and it's my last word, I won't leave Miss Katherine while she's in trouble. I know my dooty better nor that, I've always said."

"Thank you, Mrs. Simmons; you were always very good to me," said Katherine, "and you must not mind anything that is said at table. You know Stella always was hasty, and never meant half she said."

"Folks do say, Miss Katherine," said Simmons, "as it's a going to be Miss Stella's house."

"Yes, it will be her house; but whether she will stay in it or not I cannot tell you yet. It would be very nice for you, Simmons, to be left here as housekeeper with a maid or two to attend you, and nothing to do."

"I hope," said Simmons, with again a sniff, "as I am not come so low down as that—to be a caretaker, me at my time of life. And it don't seem to me justice as Miss Stella should have the house as she runned away from and broke poor old master's heart. He's never been himself from that day. I wonder she can show her face in it, Miss Katherine, that I do! Going and calling old servants savages, as has been true and faithful and stood by him, and done their best for him up to the very last."

"You must not be offended, Simmons, by a foolish word; and you must not speak so of my sister. She is my only sister, and I am glad she should have everything, everything." Katherine cried with fervour, the moisture rising to her eyes.

"Then, Miss Katherine, it's more nor anyone else is, either in the servants' hall or the kitchen. Miss Stella, or her ladyship as they calls her, is a very 'andsome young lady, and I knows it, and dreadful spoiled she has been all her life. But she don't have no consideration for servants. And we'll clear out, leastways I will for one, if she is to be the Missus here."

"I hope you will wait first and see what she intends. I am sure she would be very sorry, Simmons, to lose so good a servant as you."

"I don't know as it will grieve her much—me as she has called no better nor a savage; but she'll have to stand it all

the same. And the most of the others, I warn you, Miss Katherine, will go with me."

"Don't, dear Simmons," said Katherine. "Poor Stella has been nearly seven long years away, and she has been among black people, where—where people are not particular what they say; don't plunge her into trouble with her house the moment she gets back."

"She ought to have thought of that," cried Simmons, "afore she called a white woman and a good Christian, I hope, a savage—a savage! I am not one of them black people; and I doubt if the black people themselves would put up with it. Miss Katherine, I won't ask you for a character."

"Oh, Simmons, don't speak of that."

"No," said Simmons, dabbing her eyes, then turning to Katherine with an insinuating smile, "because—because I'll not want one if what I expect comes to pass. Miss Katherine, you haven't got no objections to me."

"You know I have not, Simmons! You know I have always looked to you to stand by me and back me up."

"Your poor old Simmons, Miss Katherine, as made cakes for you, and them apples as you were so fond of when you were small! And as was always ready, no matter for what, if it was a lunch or if it was a supper, or a picnic, or whatever you wanted, and never a grumble; if it was ever so unreasonable, Miss Katherine, dear! If this house is Miss Stella's house, take me with you! I shouldn't mind a smaller 'ouse. Fifteen is a many to manage, and so long as I've my kitchen-maid I don't hold with no crowds in the kitchen. Take me with you, Miss Katherine—you might be modest about it—seeing as you are not a married lady and no gentlemen, and a different style of establishment. But you will want a cook and a housekeeper wherever you go—take me with you, Miss Katherine, dear."

"Dear Simmons," said Katherine, "I have not money enough for that. I shall not be rich now. I shall have to go into lodgings with Hannah—if I can keep Hannah."

"You are joking," said Simmons, withdrawing with wonder her handkerchief from her eyes. "You, Mr. Tredgold's daughter, you the eldest! Oh, Miss Katherine, say it plain if you won't have me, but don't tell me that."

"But indeed it is true," cried Katherine. "Simmons, you know what things cost better than I do, and Mrs. Shanks says and Miss Mildmay——"

"Oh, Mrs. Shanks and Miss Mildmay! Them as you used to call the old cats! Don't you mind, Miss Katherine, what they say."

"Simmons, tell me," asked Katherine, "what can I do, how many servants can I keep, with five hundred a year?"

Simmons' countenance fell, her mouth opened in her consternation, her jaw dropped. She knew very well the value of money. She gasped as she repeated; "Five hundred a year!"

CHAPTER. XLI.

THE next morning the new world began frankly, as if it was nothing out of the usual, as if it had already been for years. When Katherine, a little late after her somewhat melancholy vigils, awoke, she heard already the bustle of the household of people, so different from the stillness which had been the rule for years. She heard doors opening and shutting, steps moving everywhere, Sir Charles' voice calling loudly from below, the loud tinkling of Stella's bell, which rang upstairs near her maid's room. Katherine's first instinctive thought was a question whether that maid would look less worried—whether, poor thing, she had dreamt of bags and handboxes all night. And then there came the little quaver, thrilling the air of a child's cry; poor little dissipated Job, after his vigil with his father, crying to be awake so early—the poor little boy who had tried to kick at her with his little naked feet, so white in the dimness of the corridor, on the night before. It was with the strangest sensation that Katherine got hurriedly out of bed, with a startled idea that perhaps her room might be wanted, in which there was no reason. At all events, the house had passed into new hands, and was hers no more.

Hannah came to her presently, pale and holding her breath. She had seen Job fly at the ayah, kicking her with the little feet on which she had just succeeded in forcing a pair of boots. "He said as now he could hurt her, as well as I could understand his talk. Oh! Miss Katherine, and such a little teeny boy, and to do that! But I said as I knew you would never let a servant be kicked in your house."

"Neither will my sister, Hannah—but they are all tired and strange, and perhaps a little cross," said Katherine, apologet-

ically. She went downstairs to find the breakfast-table in all the disorder that arises after a large meal—the place at which little Job had been seated next to his father littered by crumbs and other marks of his presence, and the butler hastily bringing in a little tea-pot to a corner for her use.

"Sir Charles, Miss Katherine, he's gone out; he's inspecting of the horses in the stables; and my lady has had her breakfast in her room, and it's little master as has made such a mess of the table."

"Never mind, Harrison," said Katherine.

"I should like to say, Miss Katherine," said Harrison, "as I'll go, if you please, this day month."

"Oh, don't be in a hurry!" she cried. "I have been speaking to Mrs. Simmons. Don't desert the house in such haste. Wait till you see how things go on."

"I'd stay with you Miss Katherine, to the last hour of my life; and I don't know as I couldn't make up my mind to a medical gentleman's establishment, though it's different to what I've been used to—but I couldn't never stop in a place like this."

"You don't know in the least what is going to happen here. Please go now, and leave me to my breakfast. I will speak to you later on."

A woman who is the mistress of her own house is compelled to endure these attacks, but a woman suddenly freed from all the responsibilities of ownership need not, at least, be subject to its drawbacks. Katherine took her small meal with the sensation that it was already the bread of others she was eating, which is always bitter. There had been no account made of her usual place, of any of her habits. Harrison had hastily arranged for her that corner at the lower end of the table, because of the disarray at the other, the napkins flung about, the cloth dabbled and stained. It was her own table no longer. Any philosophic mind will think of this as a very trifling thing, but it was not trifling to Katherine. The sensation of entire disregard, indifference to her comfort, and to everything that was seemly, at once chilled and irritated her; and then she

stopped herself in her uncomfortable thoughts with a troubled laugh and the question, was she, indeed, with her strong objection to all this disorder, fitting herself, as Stella said, for the position of maiden aunt? One thing was certain at least, that for the position of dependent she never would be qualified.

It was a mild and bright October day: the greyness of the afternoon had not as yet closed in, the air was full of mid-day sunshine and life. Sir Charles had come in from his inspection of "the offices" and all that was outside. He had come up, with his large step and presence, to the dressing-room in which Stella, wrapped in a quilted dressing-gown and exclaiming at the cold, lay on a sofa beside the fire. She had emerged from her bath and all those cares of the person which precede dressing for the day, and was resting before the final fatigue of putting on her gown. Katherine had been admitted only a few minutes before Sir Charles appeared, and she had made up her mind that at last her communication must be fully made now; though it did not seem very necessary, for they had established themselves with such perfect ease in the house believing it to be hers, that it would scarcely make any difference when they were made aware that it was their own. Katherine's mind, with a very natural digression, went off into an unconsciously humorous question—what difference, after all, it would have made if the house and the fortune had been hers? They would have taken possession just the same, it was evident, in any case—and she, could she ever have suggested to them to go away. She decided no, with a rueful amusement. She should not have liked Sir Charles as the master of her house, but she would have given in to it. How much better that it should be as it was, and no question on the subject at all!

"I want you to let me tell you now about papa's will."

"Poor papa!" said Stella. "I hope he was not very bad. At that age they get blunted, and don't feel. Oh, spare me as many of the details as you can, please! It makes me wretched to hear of people being ill."

"I said papa's will, Stella."

"Ah!" she cried, "that's different. Charlie will like to know. He thinks you've done nicely for us, Katherine. Of course many things would have to be re-modelled if we stopped here; but in the meantime, while we don't quite know what we are going to do——"

"I'd sell those old screws," said Sir Charles, "they're not fit for a lady to drive. I shouldn't like to see my wife behind such brutes. If you like to give me *carte blanche* I'll see to it—get you something you could take out Stella with, don't you know!"

"I wish," said Katherine, with a little impatience, "that you would allow me to speak, if it were only for ten minutes! Stella, do pray give me a little attention; this is not my house, it is yours—everything is yours. Do you hear? When papa died nothing was to be found but the will of 'seventy-one, which was made before you went away. Everybody thought he had changed it, but he had not changed it. You have got everything, Stella, everything! Do you hear? Papa did not leave even a legacy to a servant, he left nothing to me, nothing to his poor brother—everything is yours."

Sir Charles stood leaning on the mantelpiece, with his back to the fire; a dull red came over his face. "Oh, by Jove!" he said in his moustache. Stella raised herself on her pillows. She folded her quilted dressing-gown, which was Chinese and covered with wavy lines of dragons, over her chest.

"What do you mean by everything?" she said. "You mean a good bit of money, I suppose; you told me so yesterday. As for the house, I don't much care for the house, Kate. It is *rococo*, you know; it is in dreadful taste. You can keep it if you like. It could never be of any use to us."

"It isn't a bad house," said Sir Charles. He had begun to walk up and down the room. "By Jove," he said, "Stella is a cool one, but I'm not so cool. Everything left to her? Do you mean all the money, all old Tredgold's fortune—all! I say, by Jove, don't you know. That isn't fair!"

"I don't see why it isn't fair," said Stella; "I always knew

that was what papa meant. He was very fond of me, poor old papa! Wasn't he, Kate? He used to like me to have everything I wanted; there wasn't one thing, as fantastic as you please, but he would have let me have it—very different from now. Don't you remember that yacht—that we made no use of but to run away from here? Poor old man!" Here Stella laughed, which Katherine took for a sign of grace, believing and hoping that it meant the coming of tears. But no tears came. "He must have been dreadfully sorry at the end for standing out as he did, and keeping me out of it," she said with indignation, "all these years."

Sir Charles kept walking up and down the room, swearing softly into his moustache. He retained some respect for ladies in this respect, it appeared, for the only imprecation which was audible was a frequent appeal to the father of the Olympian gods. "By Jove!" sometimes "By Jupiter!" he said, and tugged at his moustache as if he would have pulled it out. This was the house in which, bewildered, he had taken all the shillings from his pocket and put them down on the table by way of balancing Mr. Tredgold's money. And now all Mr. Tredgold's money was his. He was not cool like Stella; a confused vision of all the glories of this world—horses, race-meetings, cellars of wine, entertainments of all kinds, men circling about him, not looking down upon him as a poor beggar but up at him as no end of a swell, servants to surround him all at once like a new atmosphere. He had expected something of the kind at the time of his marriage, but those dreams had long abandoned him; now they came back with a rush, not dreams any longer. Jove, Jupiter, George (whoever that deity may be) he invoked in turns; his blood took to coursing in his veins, it felt like quicksilver, raising him up, as if he might have floated, spurning with every step the floor on which he trod.

"I who had always been brought up so different!" cried Stella, with a faint whimper in her voice. "That never had been used to it! Oh, what a time I have had, Kate, having to give up things—almost everything I ever wanted—and to

do without things, and to be continually thinking could I afford it. Oh, I wonder how papa had the heart! You think I should be grateful, don't you? But I can't help remembering that I've been kept out of it, just when I wanted it most, all these years——"

She made a pause, but nobody either contradicted or agreed with her. Stella expected either the one or the other. Sir Charles went up and down swearing by Jupiter and thinking in a whirl of all the fine things before him, and Katherine sat at the end of the sofa saying nothing. In sheer self-defence Stella had to begin again.

"And nobody knows what it is beginning a house and all that without any money. I had to part with my diamonds—those last ones, don't you remember, Kate? which he gave me to make me forget Charlie. Oh, how silly girls are! I shouldn't be so ready, I can tell you, to run away another time. I should keep my diamonds. And I have not had a decent dress since I went to India—not one. The other ladies got boxes from home, but I never sent to Louise except once, and then she did so bother me about a bill to be paid, as if it were likely I could pay bills when we had no money for ourselves! Tradespeople are so unreasonable about their bills, and so are servants, for that matter, going on about wages. Why, there is Pearson—she waits upon me with a face like a mute at a funeral all because she has not got her last half year's wages! By the way, I suppose she can have them now? They have got such a pull over us, don't you know, for they can go away, and when a maid suits you it is such a bore when she wants to go away. I have had such experiences, all through the want of money. And I can't help feeling, oh how hard of him, when he hadn't really changed his mind at all, to keep me out of it for those seven years! Seven years is a dreadful piece out of one's life," cried Stella, "and to have it made miserable and so different to what one had a right to expect, all for the caprice of an old man! Why did he keep me out of it all these years?" And Stella, now thoroughly excited, sobbed to herself over the privations that were

past, from which her father could have saved her at any moment had he pleased.

"You ought to be pleased now at least," said her husband. "Come, Stella, my little girl, let's shake hands upon it. We're awfully lucky, and you shall have a good time now."

"I think I ought to have a good time, indeed!" cried Stella. "Why, it's all mine! You never would have had a penny but for me. Who should have the good of it, if not I? And I am sure I deserve it, after all I have had to go through. Pearson, is that you?" she cried. "Bring me my jewel-box. Look here," she said, taking out a case and disclosing what seemed to Katherine a splendid necklace of diamonds, "that's what I've been driven to wear!" She seized the necklace out of the case and flung it to the other end of the room. The stones swung from her hand, flashing through the air, and fell in a shimmer and sparkle of light upon the carpet. "The odious, false things!" cried Stella. "Paris—out of one of those shops, don't you know? where everything is marked 'Imitation.' Charlie got them for me for about ten pounds. And that is what I had to go to Government House in, and all the balls, and have compliments paid me on my diamonds. 'Yes, they are supposed to be of very fine water,' I used to say. I used to laugh at first—it seemed a capital joke; but when you go on wearing odious glass things and have to show them off as diamonds—for seven years!"

Sir Charles paused in his walk, and stooped and picked them up. "Yes," he said, "I gave ten pounds for them, and we had a lot of fun out of them, and you looked as handsome in them, Stella, as if they had been the best. By Jove! to be imitation, they are deuced good imitation. I don't think I know the difference, do you?" He placed the glittering thing on Katherine's knee. He wanted to bring her into the conversation with a clumsy impulse of kindness, but he did not know how to manage it. Then, leaving them there, he continued his walk. He could not keep still in his excitement, and Stella could not keep silence. The mock diamonds made a great show upon Katherine's black gown.

"Oh, I wish you'd take them away! Give them to somebody—give them to the children to play with. I'd give them to Pearson, but how could she wear a *rivière*? Fancy my wearing those things and having nothing better! You have no feeling, Kate; you don't sympathise a bit. And to think that everything might have been quite different, and life been quite happy instead of the nightmare it was! Papa has a great, great deal to answer for," Stella said.

"If that is all you think about it, I may go away," said Katherine, "for we shall not agree. You ought to speak very differently of your father, who always was so fond of you, and now he's given you everything. Poor papa! I am glad he does not know."

"But he must have known very well," cried Stella, "how he left me after pretending to be so fond of me. Do you think either Charlie or I would have done such a thing if we had not been deceived? And so was Lady Jane—and everybody. There was not one who did not say he was sure to send for us home, and see what has happened instead. Oh, he may have made up for it now. But do you think that was being really fond of me, Kate, to leave me out in India without a penny for seven years?"

Katherine rose, and the glittering stones, which had only yesterday been Lady Somers' diamonds, and as such guarded with all the care imaginable—poor Pearson having acquired her perennial look of worry as much from that as anything, having had the charge of them—rattled with a sound like glass, and fell on the floor, where they lay disgraced as Katherine went hurriedly away. And there they were found by Pearson after Lady Somers had finished her toilet and gone downstairs to lunch. Pearson gave a kick at them where they lay—the nasty imitation things that had cost her so many a thought—but then picked them up, with a certain pity, yet awe, as if they might change again into something dangerous in her very hands.

CHAPTER XLII.

KATHERINE had put herself unconsciously in her usual place at the head of the luncheon table before Stella came downstairs. At the other end was Sir Charles with little Job, set up on a pile of cushions beside him.

"Don't wait for Stella, she's always late," said Somers, helping his son from the dish before him; but at this moment Stella, rustling in a coloured dress, came briskly in.

"Oh, I say, Kate, let me have my proper place," she said; "you can't sit down with Charlie opposite, it's not decent. And oh the funny old room! Did you ever see such a *rococo* house, Charlie, all gilding and ornament? Poor papa could never have anything grand enough according to his views. We must have it all pulled to pieces, I couldn't live in such a place. Eh? why, Kate, you don't pretend you like it, you who always made a fuss."

Katherine had transferred herself to a seat at the side of the table, not without a quick sensation of self-reproach and that inevitable shame upon being thus compelled to take a lower place which no philosophy can get rid of. "I did not think where I was sitting," she cried, in instinctive apology; and then, "Let the poor house be, at least for the first week, Stella," she said.

"Oh, that's all sentiment and nonsense," cried Lady Somers. "My experience is when you're going to change a thing, do it directly; or else you just settle down and grow accustomed and think no more of it. For goodness' sake, Charlie, don't stuff that child with all the most improper things! He ought to have roast mutton and rice pudding, all the doctors say; and you are ruining his constitution, you

know you are. Why isn't there some roast mutton, William? Oh, Harrison! why can't you see that there's some roast mutton or that sort of thing, when you've got to feed a little boy."

"Me don't like roast mutton," cried Job, with a whine. "Me dine wid fader; fader give Job nice tings."

"I'll look after you, my boy," said Sir Charles, at one end of the table, while Harrison at the other, with a very solemn bow, discussed his position.

"It is not my place to horder the dinner, my lady; if your ladyship will say what you requires, I will mention it to Mrs. Simmons."

"It is I who am in fault, I suppose, Stella," cried Katherine, more angry than she could have imagined possible. "Perhaps you will see Simmons yourself to-morrow."

"Oh, not I!" cried Stella. "Fancy the bore of ordering dinner with an old-fashioned English cook that would not understand a word one says. You can do it, Charlie. Don't give the child that *pâté de foie gras*," she added, with a scream. "Who's the doctor on the strength of the establishment now, Kate? He'll have to be called in very soon, I can see, and the sooner Job has a bad liver attack the better, for then it may be possible to get him properly looked after. And I must have an English nurse that understands children, instead of that stupid ayah who gives them whatever they cry for. Don't you think it's dreadful training to give them whatever they cry for, Kate? You ought to know about children, living all this while at home and never marrying or anything. You must have gone in for charity or nursing, or Churchy things, having nothing to do. Oh, I wish you would take Job in hand! He minds nobody but his father, and his father stuffs him with everything he oughtn't to have, and keeps him up half the night. One of these days he'll have such a liver attack that it will cut him off, Charlie; and then you will have the satisfaction of feeling that it's you that have killed him, and you will not be able to say I haven't warned you hundreds of times."

"We've not come to any harm as yet, have we, Job?" said the father, placing clandestinely another objectionable morsel on the child's plate.

"No, fader. Job not dut off yet," cried, in his little shrill voice, the unfortunate small boy.

In this babble the rest of the mid-day meal was carried on, Stella's voice flowing like the principal part of the entertainment, interrupted now and then by a bass note from her husband or a little cry from her child, with a question to a servant and the respectful answer in an aside now and then. Katherine sat quite silent listening, not so much from intention as that there was no room for her to put in a word, and no apparent need for any explanation or intervention. The Somerses took calm possession, unsurprised, undisturbed by any question of right or wrong, of kindness or unkindness. Nor did Katherine blame them; she felt that they would have done exactly the same had the house and all that was in it been hers, and the real circumstances of the case made it more bearable and took away many embarrassments. She went out to drive with Stella in the afternoon, Sir Charles accompanying them that he might see whether the carriage horses were fit for his wife's use. Stella had been partly covered with Katherine's garments to make her presentable, and the little crape bonnet perched upon her fuzzy fair hair was happily very becoming, and satisfied her as to her own appearance. "Mourning's not so very bad, after all," she said, "especially when you are very fair. You are a little too dark to look nice in it, Kate. I shouldn't advise you to wear crape long. It isn't at all necessary; the rule now is crape three months, black six, and then you can go into greys and mauves. Mauve's a lovely colour. It is just as bright as pink, though it's mourning; and it suits me down to the ground—I am so fair, don't you know."

"These brutes will never do," said Sir Charles. "Is this the pace you have been going, Miss Kate? Stella will not stand it, that's clear. Not a likely person to nod along like a hearse or an old dowager, is she?—and cost just as much, the old fat brutes, as a proper turn-out."

"It's the same old landau, I declare," cried Stella, "that we used to cram with people for picnics and dances and things. Mine was the victoria. Have you kept the victoria all the time, Kate? Jervis made it spin along I can tell you. And the little brougham I used to run about in, that took us down to the yacht, don't you remember, Charlie, that last night; me in my wedding dress, though nobody suspected it—that is, nobody but those that knew. What a lot there were, though," cried Stella, with a laugh, "that knew!—and what a dreadful bore, Kate, when you would insist upon coming with me, and everybody guessing and wondering how we'd get out of it. We did get out of it capitally, didn't we, all owing to my presence of mind."

"All's well that ends well," said Sir Charles. "We've both had a deuced lot of doubts on that question—between times. Miss Kate, would you mind telling me what kind of a figure it is, this fortune that Stella is supposed to have come into? Hang me if I know; it might be hundreds or it might be thousands. You see I'm a disinterested sort of fellow," he said, with an uneasy laugh.

"The lawyer said," Katherine explained, "that it could not be under, but might be considerably over, fifty thousand a year."

Sir Charles was silent for a moment and grew very red, which showed up his sunburnt brick-red complexion like a sudden dye of crimson. He caught his breath a little, but with an effort at an indifferent tone repeated, "Fifty thousand pounds!"

"A year," Katherine said.

"Well!" cried Stella, "what are you sitting there for, like a stuck pig, staring at me? Need there have been so much fuss about it if it had been less than that? Papa wasn't a man to leave a few hundreds, was he? I wonder it's so little, for my part. By the time you've got that old barrack of yours done up, and a tidy little house in town, and all our bills paid, good gracious, it's nothing at all, fifty thousand a year! I hope it will turn out a great deal more, Kate. I daresay your

lawyer is the sort of person to muddle half of it away in expenses and so forth. Who is he? Oh, old Sturgeon that used to come down sometimes. Well, he is not up to date, I am sure. He'll be keeping the money in dreadful consols or something, instead of making the best of it. You can tell him that I shan't stand that sort of thing. It shall be made the best of if it is going to belong to me."

"And what have you, Miss Kate?" said her brother-in-law, "to balance this fine fortune of Stella's—for it is a fine fortune, and she knows nothing about it, with her chatter."

"Oh, I know nothing about it; don't I?" said Stella. "Papa didn't think so. He said I had a capital head for money, and that I was a chip of the old block, and all that sort of thing. What has Kate got? Oh, she's got money of her own. I used to envy her so when we were girls. I had a deal more than she had, for papa was always silly about me—dresses and jewels and so forth that I had no business to have at that age; but Kate had money of her own. I could always get plenty from papa, but she had it of her own; don't you remember, Kate? I always wished to be you; I thought that it was a shame that you should have all that left to you and me nothing. And if you come to that, so it was, for mamma was my mother as well as Kate's, and she had no business to leave her money to one of us and take no notice of me."

"We are quits now, at all events, Stella," said Katherine, with the best sort of a smile which she could call up on her face.

"Quits! I don't think so at all," cried Stella, "for you have had it and I have been kept out of it for years and years. Quits, indeed; no, I'm sure I don't think so. I have always envied you for having mamma's money since I was twelve years old. I don't deny I had more from papa; but then it wasn't mine. And now I have everything from papa, which is the least he could do, having kept me out of it for so long; but not a penny from my mother, which isn't justice, seeing I am quite as much her child as you."

"Shut up, Stella!" said Sir Charles, in his moustache.

"Why should I shut up? It's quite true that Katherine has had it since she was fifteen; that's—let me see—fourteen years, nearly the half of her life, and no expenses to speak of. There must be thousands and thousands in the bank, and so little to do with it. She's richer than we are, when all is said."

"Stella, you must remember," cried Katherine excitedly in spite of herself, "that the money in the bank was always——"

"Oh, I knew you would say that," cried Stella, in an aggrieved tone; "you've lent it to me, haven't you? Though not so very much of it, and of course you will get it back. Oh, don't be afraid, you will get it back! It will be put among the other bills, and it will be paid with the rest. I would rather be in debt to Louise or any one than to a sister who is always thinking about what she has lent me. And it is not so very much, either; you used to dole it out to me a hundred at a time, or even fifty at a time, as if it were a great favour, while all the time you were enjoying papa's money, which by law was mine. I don't think very much of favours like that."

"I hope, Miss Tredgold," said Sir Charles, lifting his hat, "that after this very great injustice, as it seems to me, you will at least make your home with us, and see it—if we can't come to any arrangement. I suppose it's true that ladies alone don't want very much, not like a family—or—or two careless spendthrift sort of people like Stella and me, but——"

"Well, of course," cried Stella, "I hope, Kate, you'll pay us a visit when—whenever you like, in short. I don't say make your home with us, as Charlie says, for I know you wouldn't like it, and it's a mistake, I think, for relations to live together. You know yourself, it never works. Charlie, do hold your tongue and let me speak. I know all about it a great deal better than you do. To have us to fall back upon when she wants it, to be able to write and say, take me in—which, of course, I should always do if it were possible—that is the thing that would suit Kate. Of course you will have rooms of your own somewhere. I shouldn't advise a house,

for that is such a bother with servants and things, and runs away with such a lot of money, but—— Oh, I declare, there is the Midge, with the two old cats! Shall we have to stop and speak if they see us? I am not going to do that. I heard of papa's death only yesterday, and I am not fit to speak to anybody as yet," she cried, pulling over her face the crape veil which depended from her bonnet behind. And the two old ladies in the Midge were much impressed by the spectacle of Stella driving out with her husband and her sister, and covered with a crape veil, on the day after her return. "Poor thing," they said, "Katherine has made her come out to take the air; but she has a great deal of feeling, and it has been a great shock to her. Did you see how she was covered with that great veil? Stella was a little thing that I never quite approved of, but she had a feeling heart."

Katherine was a little sick at heart with all the talk, with Stella's rattle running through everything, with the fulfilment of all her fears, and the small ground for hope of any nobler thoughts. She was quite decided never under any circumstances to take anything from her sister. That from the first moment had been impossible. She had seen the whole position very clearly, and made up her mind without a doubt or hesitation. She was herself perfectly well provided for, she had said to herself, she had no reason to complain; and she had known all along how Stella would take it, exactly as she did, and all that would follow. But a thing seldom happens exactly as you believe it will happen; and the extreme ease with which this revolution had taken place, the absence of excitement, of surprise, even of exultation, had the most curious effect upon her. She was confounded by Stella's calm, and yet she knew that Stella would be calm. Nothing could be more like Stella than her conviction that she herself, instead of being extraordinarily favoured, was on the whole rather an injured person when all was said and done. The whole of this had been in Katherine's anticipations of the crisis. And yet she was as bitterly disappointed as if she had not known Stella, and as if her sister had been her ideal, and she had

thought her capable of nothing that was not lofty and noble. A visionary has always that hope in her heart. It is always possible that in any new emergency a spirit nobler and better than of old may be brought out.

Katherine stole out in the early twilight to her favourite walk. The sea was misty, lost in a great incertitude, a suffusion of blueness upon the verge of the sand below, but all besides mist in which nothing could be distinguished. The horizon was blurred all round, so that no one could see what was there, though overhead there was a bit of sky clear enough. The hour just melting out of day into night, the mild great world of space, in which lay hidden the unseen sea and the sky, were soothing influences, and she felt her involuntary anger, her unwilling disappointment, die away. She forgot that there was any harm done. She only remembered that Stella was here with her children, and that it was so natural to have her in her own home. The long windows of the drawing-room were full of light, so were those of Stella's bedroom, and a number of occupied rooms shining out into the dimness. It was perhaps *rococo*, as they said, but it was warm and bright. Katherine had got herself very well in hand before she heard a step near her on the gravel, and looking up saw that her brother-in-law was approaching. She had not been much in charity with Sir Charles Somers before, but he had not shown badly in these curious scenes. He had made some surprised exclamations, he had exhibited some kind of interest in herself. Katherine was very lonely, and anxious to think well of someone. She was almost glad to see him, and went towards him with something like pleasure.

"I have come to bring you in," he said; "Stella fears that you will catch cold. She says it is very damp, even on the top of the cliff."

"I don't think I shall take cold; but I will gladly go in if Stella wants me," said Katherine; then, as Somers turned with her at the end of her promenade, she said: "The house is *rococo*, I know; but I do hope you will like it a little and sometimes live in it, for the sake of our youth which was passed here."

"You don't seem to think where you are to live yourself," he said hurriedly. "I think more of that. We seem to be putting you out of everything. Shouldn't you like it for yourself? You have more associations with it than anyone. I wish you would say you would like to have it—for yourself——"

"Oh, no," said Katherine, "not for the world. I couldn't keep it up, and I should not like to have it—not for the world."

"I am afraid all this is dreadfully unjust. There should be a—partition, there should be some arrangement. It isn't fair. You were always with the old man, and nursed him, and took care of him, and all that——"

"No," said Katherine; "my father was a little peculiar—he liked to have the nurse who was paid, as he said, for that. I have not any claim on that ground. And then I have always had my own money, as Stella told you. I am much obliged to you, but you really do not need to trouble yourself about me."

"Are you really sure that is so?" he said in a tone between doubt and relief. Then he looked round, shivering a little at the mist, and said that Stella was looking for her sister, and that he thought it would be much more comfortable if they went in to tea.

CHAPTER XLIII.

THE public of Sliplin gave Lady Jane the *pass*. Though every individual who had the least right of acquaintance with Lady Somers longed to call, to see how she was looking, to see how she was taking it, to see the dear babies, &c., &c., yet there was a universal consent, given tacitly, that Lady Jane, not only as the head of the local society, but as having been so deeply involved in Stella's marriage, should come first; and, accordingly, for two whole days the neighbours had refrained, even Mrs. Shanks and Miss Mildmay holding back. When Lady Jane's carriage appeared at last, there was a little rustle of interest and excitement through the place. The Stanhopes of the old Leigh House, who were half-way between Steephill and Sliplin, saw it sweep past their lodge gates, and ran in in a body to say to their mother, "Now, to-morrow we can call!" and the same sentiment flew over the place from one house to another. "Lady Jane has just driven down to the Cliff. I have just seen Lady Jane's carriage pass on her way to see Lady Somers." "Well, that will be a meeting!" some ladies said. It appeared to a number of them somehow that it must have been Lady Jane's machinations that secured Mr. Tredgold's fortune for his undutiful child—though, indeed, they could not have told how.

These days of seclusion would have been very dreary to Stella had she not been occupied with her dressmaker, a visitor who is always more exciting and delightful than any other. Louise, who had insisted so on the payment of her little bill in Stella's days of humiliation, was now all obsequiousness, coming down herself to receive Lady Somers' orders, to fit Lady Somers' mourning, to suggest everything that could be

done in the way of lightening it now, and changing it at the earliest opportunity. Hours of delightful consultation as to Stella's figure, which she discussed as gravely as if it had been a matter of national importance—as well as the stuffs which were to clothe it, and the fashion in which they were to be made—flew over her head, during which time her husband mooned about the stables, generally with little Job upon his shoulder, and finally, unable to endure it any longer, went up to town, where no doubt he was happy—though the wail of the little boy left behind did not add to the peace of the house. The dressmaker had been dismissed by the time that Lady Jane arrived, and Stella sat contemplating her crape in all the mirrors round, and assuring herself that when it was perfectly fresh as now, it was not so bad, and unquestionably becoming to a very fair complexion. "I can't say you look very well in it, Kate; you are darker, and then yours is not quite fresh. To be quite fresh is indispensable. If one was a widow, for instance, and obliged to wear it, it ought to be renewed every week; but I do think it's becoming to me. It throws up one's whiteness, don't you think, and brings out the colour," said Stella standing before the glass. "Oh, Kate, you are so unsympathetic; come and see what I mean," she cried.

"Yes, I see—you look very nice, Stella. The black *is* becoming to you—but, after all, we don't wear crape to be becoming."

"Oh, Fudge!" cried Stella, "what do you wear it for? Because it's the custom, and you can't help yourself. What does it matter to poor papa what we wear? He always liked to see me in gay colours—he had too florid a taste, if the truth must be told. If I hadn't known better by instinct (for I'm sure I never had any teaching), and if we hadn't been so fortunate as to fall into the hands of Louise, I should have been dressed like 'Arriet out for a holiday. It's curious," said Stella reflectively, "taste is just born in some people and others you can't teach it to. I am so glad the first was my case. We labour under disadvantages, you know, being our

father's daughters—that is, not me, now everything has come straight, but you will, Kate, especially as you have not got the money. To be papa's daughter and yet not his heiress, you know, is a kind of injury to people that might come after you. You will be going into the world upon false pretences. I wonder now that you did not marry somebody before it was all known."

"It was only known on the night of papa's funeral, Stella. I could not have married many people between then and now," said Katherine, trying to take this speech as lightly as it was made.

"That is true—still you must have had people after you. With your expectations, and a good-looking girl. You always were quite a good-looking girl, Kate."

"I am grateful for your approbation, Stella."

"Only a little stuck-up looking—and—well, not quite so young as you used to be. If I were you I would go in for that old fellow, don't you remember, whom papa got rid of in such a hurry—the man that came over with us in the *Aurungzebe*. Somebody told me he had done very well out there, and, of course, Charlie asked him to come and see us. And you know you were his fancy, Kate; it was you, not me—don't you remember how everybody laughed? I should go in for him now if I were you. An old affair like that is quite a nice foundation. And I hear he has done very well, and he is just a suitable age, and it doesn't really matter that—— What is passing the window? Oh," cried Stella, clapping her hands, "the very same old landau that I remember all my life, and Lady Jane in her war paint, just the same. Let's prepare to receive cavalry!" she cried. With a twist of her hand she drew two chairs into position, one very low, graceful and comfortable for herself, another higher, with elbows for Lady Jane. And Stella seated herself, with her fresh crape falling about her in crisp folds, her fair face and frizzy locks coming out of its blackness with great *éclat*, and her handkerchief in her hand. It was as good as a play (she herself felt, for I doubt whether Katherine relished

the scene) to see her rise slowly and then drop, as it were, as lightly as a feather, but beyond speech, into Lady Jane's arms, who, deeply impressed by this beautiful pose, clasped her and kissed her and murmured, "My poor child; my poor, dear child!" with real tears in her eyes.

"But what a comfort it must be to your mind," Lady Jane said, when she had seated herself and was holding Stella's hand, "to feel that there could be nothing against you in his mind—no rancour, no unkindness—only the old feeling that he loved you beyond everything; that you were still his pet, his little one, his favourite——" Lady Jane herself felt it so much that she was almost choked by a sob.

"Oh, dear Lady Jane," cried Stella, evidently gulping down her own, "if I did not feel *that*, how could I ever have endured to come to this house—to dear papa's house—to my own old home! that I was so wicked as to run away from, and so silly, never thinking. My only consolation is, though Kate has so little, so very little, to tell me of that dreadful time, that he must have forgiven me at the last."

It was a very dreadful recollection to obtrude into the mind of the spectator in such a touching scene; but Katherine could not keep out of her eyes the vision of an old man in his chair saying quite calmly, "God damn them," as he sat by his fireside. The thought made her shudder; it was one never to be communicated to any creature; but Lady Jane perceived the little tremulous movement that betrayed her, and naturally misinterpreted its cause.

"Yes," she said, "my dear Stella, I am very happy for you; but there is poor Katherine left out in the cold who has done so much for him all these years."

Stella, as was so natural to her, went on with the catalogue of her own woes without taking any notice of this. "Such a time as we have gone through, Lady Jane! Oh, I have reflected many a time, if it had not been for what everybody told us, I never, never, would have done so silly a thing. You all said, you remember, that papa would not hold out, that he could not get on without me, that he would be quite

sure to send for me home. And I was over-persuaded. India is a dreadful place. You have double pay, but, oh, far more than double expenses! and as for dress, you want as much, if not more, than you would in London, and tribes upon tribes of servants that can do nothing. And then the children coming. And Job that has never had a day's health, and how he is to live in England with a liver like a Strasburg goose, and his father stuffing him with everything that is bad for him, I don't know. It has been a dreadful time; Kate has had all the good and I've had all the evil for seven years—fancy, for seven long years."

"But you've had a good husband, at all events, Stella; and some pleasant things," Lady Jane murmured in self-defence.

"Oh, Charlie! I don't say that he is any worse than the rest. But fancy me—me, Stella, that you knew as a girl with everything I could think of—going to Government House over and over again in the same old dress; and Paris diamonds that cost ten pounds when they were new."

At this dreadful picture Lady Jane bowed her head. What could she reply? Katherine had not required to go anywhere a number of times in the same old dress—but that was probably because she went to very few places—not in Paris diamonds at ten pounds, for she had not any diamonds at all, false or true. To change the subject, which had taken a turn more individual than was pleasant, she asked whether she might not see the dear children?

"Oh yes," said Stella, "if they will come—or, at least, if Job will come, for baby is too small to have a will of her own. Kate, do you think that you could bring Job? It isn't that it is any pleasure to see him, I'm sure. When his father is here he will speak to no one else, and when his father isn't here he just cries and kicks everybody. I think, Kate, he hates you less than the rest. Will you try and get him to come if Lady Jane wants to see him? Why anybody should want to see him I am sure is a mystery to me."

It was an ill-advised measure on Stella's part, for Katherine

had no sooner departed somewhat unwillingly on her mission than Lady Jane seized her young friend's hand again: "Oh, Stella, I must speak to you, I must, while she is away. Of course, you and Charlie have settled it between you—you are going to set everything right for Katherine? It was all settled on her side that if she got the money you should have your share at once. And you will do the same at once, won't you, without loss of time, Charlie and you?"

"You take away my breath," cried Stella, freeing her hand. "What is it that I have got to do in such a hurry? I hate a hurry; it makes me quite ill to be pressed to do anything like running for a train. We only came a few days ago, Lady Jane; we haven't been a week at home. We haven't even seen the lawyer yet; and do you think Charlie and I discuss things about money without loss of time—oh, no! we always like to take the longest time possible. They have never been such very agreeable things, I can tell you, Lady Jane, discussions about money between Charlie and me."

"That, to be sure, in the past," said Lady Jane, "but not now, my dear. I feel certain he has said to you, 'We must put things right for Katherine—' before now."

"Perhaps he has said something of the kind; but he isn't at all a man to be trusted in money matters, Charlie. I put very little faith in him. I don't know what the will is, as yet; but so far as I possibly can I shall keep the management of the money in my own hands. Charlie would make ducks and drakes of it if he had his way."

"But, my dear Stella, this is a matter that you cannot hesitate about for a moment; the right and wrong of it are quite clear. We all thought your father's money would go to Katherine, who had never crossed him in any way——"

"What does that matter? It was me he was fond of!" Stella cried, with disdain.

"Well; so it has proved. But Katherine was prepared at once to give you your share. You must give her hers, Stella—you must, and that at once. You must not leave a question upon your own sense of justice, your perception of right and

wrong. Charlie!" cried Lady Jane with excitement, "Charlie is a gentleman at least. He knows what is required of him. I shall stay until he comes home, for I must speak to him at once."

"That is his dog-cart, I suppose," said Stella calmly, "passing the window; but you must remember, Lady Jane, that the money is not Charlie's to make ducks and drakes with. I don't know how the will is drawn, but I am sure papa would not leave me in the hands of any man he didn't know. I shall have to decide for myself; and I know more about it than Charlie does. Katherine has money of her own, which I never had. She has had the good of papa's money for these seven years, while I have not had a penny. She says herself that she did not nurse him or devote herself to him, beyond what was natural, that she should require compensation for that. He liked the nurse that had her wages paid her, and there was an end of it; which is exactly what I should say myself. I don't think it's a case for your interference, or Charlie's, or anybody's. I shall do what I think right, of course, but I can't undertake that it shall be what other people think right. Oh, Charlie, there you are at last. And here's Lady Jane come to see us and give us her advice."

"Hallo, Cousin Jane," said Sir Charles, "just got back from town, where I've had a bit of a run since yesterday. Couldn't stand it any longer here; and I say, Stella, now you've got your panoply, let's move up bag and baggage, and have a bit of a lark."

"You are looking very well, Charlie," said Lady Jane, "and so is Stella, considering, and I am waiting to see the dear children. You'd better come over to us, there is some shooting going on, and you are not supposed to have many larks while Stella is in fresh crape. I have been speaking to her about Katherine." Here Lady Jane made a sudden and abrupt stop by way of emphasis.

"Oh, about Kate!" Sir Charles said, pulling his moustache.

"Stella doesn't seem to see, what I hope you see, that your

honour's concerned. They say women have no sense of honour; I don't believe that, but there are cases. You, however, Charlie, you're a gentleman; at least you know what's your duty in such a case."

Sir Charles pulled his moustache more than ever. "Deuced hard case," he said, "for Kate."

"Yes, there is no question about that; but for you, there is no question about that either. It is your first duty, it is the only course of action for a gentleman. As for Stella, if she does not see it, it only proves that what's bred in the bone—I'm sure I don't want to say anything uncivil. Indeed, Stella, it is only as your friend, your *relation*," cried Lady Jane, putting much emphasis on the word, "that I allow myself to speak."

It cost Lady Jane something to call herself the relation of Mr. Tredgold's daughter, and it was intended that the statement should be received with gratitude; but this Stella, Lady Somers, neither felt nor affected. She was quite well aware that she had now no need of Lady Jane. She was herself an extremely popular person wherever she went, of that there could be no doubt—she had proved it over and over again in the seven years of her humiliation. Popular at Government House, popular at every station, wherever half-a-dozen people were assembled together. And now she was rich. What need she care for anyone, or for any point of honour, or the opinion of the county even, much less of a place like Sliplin? Lady Jane could no longer either make her or mar her. She was perfectly able to stand by herself.

"It is very kind of you," she said, "to say that, though it doesn't come very well after the other. Anyhow, I'm just as I've been bred, as you say, though I have the honour to be Charlie's wife. Lady Jane wants to see Job; I wish you'd go and fetch him. I suppose Kate has not been able to get that little sprite to come. You need not try," said Stella calmly, when Somers had left the room, "to turn Charlie against me, Lady Jane. He is a fool in some things, but he knows on which side his bread is buttered. If I have fifty thousand a year

and he not half as many farthings, you may believe he will think twice before he goes against me. I am very proud to be your relation, of course, but it hasn't a money value, or anything that is of the first importance to us. Kate won't be the better, but the worse, for any interference. I have my own ways of thinking, and I shall do what I think right."

"Oh, here is the dear baby at last!" cried Lady Jane, accomplishing her retreat, though routed horse and foot, behind the large infant, looking rather bigger than the slim ayah who carried her, who now came triumphantly into the room, waving in her hand the rather alarming weapon of a big coral, and with the true air of Stella's child in Stella's house. A baby is a very good thing to cover a social defeat, and this one was so entirely satisfactory in every particular that the visitor had nothing to do but admire and applaud. "What a specimen for India," she cried; but this was before Job made his remarkable entrance in the dimness of the twilight, which had begun by this time to veil the afternoon light.

CHAPTER XLIV.

"Do away, me not do wid you, me fader's boy," said little Job, as Katherine exerted her persuasions to bring him downstairs.

"That is quite true, Job; but father has not come back yet. Come downstairs with me, and we shall see him come back."

Job answered with a kick from the little boot which had just come in somewhat muddy from a walk—a kick which, as it happened to touch a tender point, elicited from Katherine a little cry. The child backed against the ayah, holding her fast; then glared at Katherine with eyes in which malice mingled with fright. "Me dlad to hurt you, me dlad to hurt you!" he cried. It was evident that he expected a blow.

"It is a pity to hurt anyone," said Katherine; "but if it has made you glad you shouldn't be cross. Come with me downstairs."

"I hate you," said the child. "You punith me moment I let ayah do."

"No, I shall not punish you. I shall only take you downstairs to see your pretty mamma, and wait till father comes back. I think I hear the dog-cart now. Hark! that is your father now."

The child ran to the window with a flush of eagerness. "Lift me up, lift me up!" he cried. It did not matter to him who did this so long as he got his will; and though he hit with his heels against Katherine's dress, he did not kick her again. "Fader, fader—me's fader's boy!" cried little Job. The little countenance changed; it was no longer that of a little gnome, but caught an angelic reflection. He waved

his thin small arms over his head from Katherine's arms. "Fader, fader—Fader's come back! Job's good boy!" he cried. Then the little waving arm struck against Katherine's head, and he paused to look at her. The expression of his face changed again. A quiver of fierce terror came upon it; he was in the power of a malignant being stronger than himself. He looked at her with a sort of impotent, disappointed fury. "Put me down, and I'll not kick you no more," he said.

"Certainly I'll put you down. Will you come with me now and meet your father?" Katherine said.

He had his hand ready to seize her hair, to defend himself, but shrunk away when she put him down without any more expressions of animosity, and ran for the head of the staircase. At that dreadful passage, however, the little creature paused. He was afraid for the descent; the hall was not yet lighted up below, and it seemed a well of darkness into which it was not wonderful that so small a being should be terrified to go down. "Is fader there?" he said to Katherine, "will they hurt fader?" There were vaguely visible forms in the hall, a gleam of vague daylight from the doorway, and then it became dreadfully apparent to Job that something must have happened to fader, who had disappeared within the drawing-room. "Dhey have swallowed him up—Dhey have eaten him up!" he cried. "Oh, fader, fader!" with a frantic shout, clinging to Katherine's knees.

"No, no, my little boy. Your father has not been hurt. Come, we'll go down and find him," Katherine said. When they were nearly at the foot of the stairs, during which time he had clung to her with a little hot grip, half piteous half painful, there suddenly sprung up in the dark hall below, at the lighting of the lamp, a gleam of bright light, and Sir Charles became visible at the foot of the stairs, coming towards them. The child gave a shriek of joy and whirled himself from the top of some half-dozen steps into his father's arms. "You're not eated up," he said; "fader, fader! Job fader's boy."

"Has he been cross?" said Sir Charles. He held the little creature in his arms lovingly, with a smile that irradiated his own heavy countenance like a gleam of sunshine.

"I hates her," cried Job. "I kicked her. She dot nothing to do with me."

"Job, Job," said the father gently, "you shouldn't be so cross and so hasty to a kind lady who only wanted to bring you to father. If you behave like that she will never be kind to you again."

"I don't tare. I hates ze lady," Job said.

His father lifted his eyes and shrugged his shoulders apologetically to Katherine, and then laughed and carried his little son away. Decidedly, whatever Katherine was to make a success in, it was not in the *role* of maiden aunt.

Next day, to the distress and trouble of Katherine, early in the afternoon there came a visitor whose appearance made Stella turn towards her sister with an open-eyed look of malice and half ridicule. No; Lady Somers did not intend it so. It was a look of significance, "I told you so," and call upon Katherine's attention. The visitor was James Stanford, their fellow-passenger by the *Aurungzebe*. He explained very elaborately that Sir Charles had given him an invitation, and that, finding himself on business of his own in the Isle of Wight, he had taken advantage of it. He was not a man who could quickly make himself at his ease. He seemed oppressed with a consciousness that he ought not to be there, that he wanted some special permission, as if it had been with some special purpose that he had come.

"Oh, you need not apologise," said Stella; "if you had not come then you might have apologised. We expect everybody to come to see us. Fancy, we've seen scarcely anyone for a week almost, except some old friends who have lectured us and told us what was our duty. Do you like to be told what is your duty, Mr. Stanford? I don't; if I were ever so much inclined to do it before, I should set myself against it then. That is exactly how narrow country people do; they turn you against everything. They tell you this and that as if you did

not know it before, and make you turn your back on the very thing you wanted to do."

"I don't think," said Stanford, "that I could be turned like that from anything I wanted to do."

"Perhaps you are strong-minded," said Stella. "I am not, oh, not a bit. I am one of the old-fashioned silly women. I like to be left alone and to do my own way. Perhaps it's a silly way, but it's mine. And so you have had business on the island, Mr. Stanford? Have you seen that lady again—that lady with the black eyes and the yellow hair? She will not like it at all if she doesn't see you. She was very attentive to you during the voyage. Now, you can't deny that she was attentive. She was a great deal nicer to you than you deserved. And such a pretty woman! To be sure that was not the natural colour of her hair. She had done something to it; up at the roots you could see that it had once been quite dark. Well, why not, if she likes yellow hair better? It is going quite out of fashion, so there can be no bad object in it, don't you know?"

Stella laughed largely, but her visitor did not respond. He looked more annoyed, Katherine thought, than he had any occasion to be, and her pride was roused, for it seemed to her that they both looked at herself as if the woman who had paid attention to Mr. Stanford could have anything to do with her. She changed the subject by asking him abruptly if he felt the rigour of the English climate after his long life in India.

"Yes—no, a little," he said. "They say that we bring so much heat with us that we do not feel it for the first year, and as I shall have to go back——"

"Are you going back? Why should you go back?" said Stella. "I thought you civil servants had such good times, not ordered about like soldiers. They always said in the regiment that the civilians were so well off; good pay and constant leave, and off to the hills whenever they liked, and all sorts of indulgences."

"I am afraid the regiment romances," said Stanford, "but

I do not complain. On the whole I like India. One is sure, or almost sure, of being of some use, and there are many alleviations to the climate. If that was all, I should not at all mind going out again——”

“Ah, I understand,” said Stella. And then she added quickly, “I am so sorry I can’t ask you to stay to dinner to-night. We have a grand function coming off to-night. The lawyer is coming down, and we are to hear how we stand, and how much money we are to have. I think I hear him now, and I can’t let Charlie steal a march and tackle him before I am there. Katherine, will you look after Mr. Stanford till I come back? I don’t trust Charlie a step further than I see him. He might be doing some silly thing and compromising me while I am sitting here talking, but as soon as ever I can escape I will come back.”

She rose as she spoke and gave Katherine a look—a look significant, malicious, such as any spectator might have read. Stanford had risen to open the door, and perhaps he did not see it, but it left Katherine so hot with angry feeling, so ashamed and indignant, that he could not fail but perceive it when Stella had gone away. He looked at her a little wistfully as he took his seat again. “I fear I am detaining you here against your will,” he said.

“Oh, no,” said Katherine, from the mist of her confusion, “it is nothing. Stella has not yet got over the excitement of coming home. It has been increased very much by some incidents which she did not expect. You have heard her story of course? They—eloped—and my father was supposed to have cut her off and put her out of his will; but it appears, on the contrary, that he has left everything to her. She only heard of papa’s death, and of—this—when she got home.”

There was a little pause, and then he said reflectively, with a curious sort of regret, as if this brief narrative touched himself at some point, “It seems, then, that fortune after all favours the brave.”

“The brave?” said Katherine, surprised. “Oh, you mean because of their running away? They have paid for it, they

think, very severely in seven years of poverty in India, but now—now Stella's turn has come."

"I quite understand Lady Somers' excitement without that. Even for myself, this house has so many recollections. The mere thought of it makes my heart beat when I am thousands of miles away. When I first came, an uncouth boy—you will scarcely remember that, Miss Tredgold."

"Oh, I remember very well," said Katherine, gradually recovering her ease, and pleased with a suggestion of recollections so early that there could be no embarrassment in them; "but not the uncouthness. We were very glad to have you for a play-fellow, Stella and I."

"She was a little round ball of a girl," he said.

"But even then," said Katherine, and paused. She had been about to say, "expected to be the first," but changed her expression, "was the favourite of everybody," she said.

"Ah," said Stanford, and then pursued his recollections. "I used to count the days till I could come back. And then came the next stage. Your father was kind to me when I was a boy. Afterwards, he was quite right, he wanted to know what I was good for."

"He was what people call practical," said Katherine. "Fortunately, he did not think it necessary with us. We were accepted as useless creatures, *objets de luxe*, which a rich man could afford to keep up, and which did him more credit the gayer they were and the more costly. Poor papa! It is not for us to criticise him, Mr. Stanford, in his own house."

"No, indeed; but I am not criticising him. I am proving him to be right by my own example. He thought everybody could conquer fortune as he himself had done; but everybody cannot do that, any more than everybody can write a great poem. You require special qualities, which he had. Some go down altogether in the battle and are never more heard of; some do, what perhaps he would have thought worse, like me."

"Why like you? Have you done badly? I have not heard so," cried Katherine, with a quick impulse of interest, which she showed in spite of herself.

"I have done," he said, "neither well nor ill. I am of that company that Dante was so contemptuous about, don't you remember? I think he is too hard upon them, *che senza infamia e senza gloria vive*. Don't you think there is a little excuse—a little pardon for them, Miss Tredgold? The poor fellows aim at the best. They know it when they see it; they put out their hands to it, but cannot grasp it. And then what should the alternative be?"

"It is a difficult question," said Katherine with a smile, not knowing what he would be at. He meant something, it was evident, beyond the mere words. His eyes had a strained look of emotion, and there was a slight quiver under the line of his moustache. She had not been used to discussions of this kind. The metaphysics of life had little place in the doctor's busy mind, and still less in the noisy talk of the Sir Charles Somers of existence. She did not feel herself quite equal to the emergency. "I presume that a man who could not get the best, as you say, would have to content himself with the best he could get. At least, that is how it would come out in housekeeping, which is my sole science, you know," she said, with a faint laugh.

"Yes," he said, almost eagerly. "That is perhaps natural. But you don't know how a man despises himself for it. Having once known a better way, to fall back upon something that is second or third best, that has been my way. I have conquered nothing. I have made no fortune or career. I have got along. A man would feel less ashamed of himself if he had made some great downfall—if he had come to grief once and for all. To win or lose, that's the only worthy alternative. But we nobodies do neither—we don't win, oh, far from it! and haven't the heart to lose—together——"

What did he mean? To do Katherine justice, she had not the smallest idea. She kept her eyes upon him with a little curiosity, a little interest. Her sense of embarrassment and consciousness had entirely passed away.

"You are surely much too severe a judge," she said. "I never heard that to come to grief, as you say, was a desirable

end. If one cannot win, one would at least be glad to retire decently—to make a retreat with honour, not to fling up everything. You might live then to fight another day, which is a thing commended in the finest poetry," she added with a laugh.

He rose up and began to walk about the room. "You crush me all the more by seeming to agree with me," he said. "But if you knew how I feel the contrast between what I am and what I was when last I was here! I went away from your father burning with energy, feeling that I could face any danger—that there was nothing I couldn't overcome. I found myself off, walking to London, I believe, before I knew. I felt as if I could have walked to India, and overcome everything on the way! That was the heroic for a moment developed. Of course, I had to come to my senses—to take the train, to see about my berth, to get my outfit, &c. These hang weights about a man's neck. And then, of course, I found that fate does not appear in one impersonation to be assaulted and overcome, as I suppose I must have thought, and that a civil servant has got other things to think of than fortune and fame. The soldiers have the advantage of us in that way. They can take a bold step, as Somers did, and carry out their ideal and achieve their victory——"

"Don't put such high-flown notions into my brother-in-law's head. I don't think he had any ideal. He thought Stella was a very pretty girl. They do these things upon no foundation at all, to make you shiver—a girl and a man who know nothing of each other. But it does well enough in most cases, which is a great wonder. They get on perfectly. Getting on is, I suppose, the active form of that condition—*senza gloria e senza infamia*—of which you were speaking?" Katherine had quite recovered her spirits. The Italian, the reference to Dante, had startled her at first, but had gradually re-awakened in her a multitude of gentle thoughts. They had read Dante together in the old far past days of youth. It is one of the studies, grave as the master is, which has facilitated many a courtship, as Browning, scarcely less grave, does also.

The difficulties, to lay two heads together over, are so many, and the poetry which makes the heart swell is so akin to every emotion. She remembered suddenly a seat under one of the acacias where she had sat with him over this study. She had always had an association with that bench, but had not remembered till now that it flashed upon her what it was. She could see it almost without changing her position from the window. The acacia was ragged now, all its leaves torn from it by the wind, the lawn in front covered with rags of foliage withered and gone—not the scene she remembered, with the scent of the acacias in the air, and the warm summer sunshine and the gleam of the sea. She was touched by the recollection, stirred by it, emotions of many kinds rising in her heart. No one had ever stirred or touched her heart but this man—he, no doubt, more by her imagination than any reality of feeling. But yet she remembered the quickened beat, the quickened breath of her girlhood, and the sudden strange commotion of that meeting they had had, once and no more, in the silence of the long years. And now, again, and he in great excitement, strained to the utmost, his face and his movements full of nervous emotion, turning towards her once more.

“Miss Tredgold,” he said, but his lips were dry and parched. He stopped again to take breath. “Katherine,” he repeated, then paused once more. Whatever he had to say, it surely was less easy than a love tale. “I came to England,” he said, bringing it out with a gasp, “in the first place for a pretence, to bring home—my little child.”

All the mist that was over the sea seemed to sweep in and surround Katherine. She rose up instinctively, feeling herself wrapped in it, stifled, blinded. “Your little child?” she said, with a strange muffled cry.

CHAPTER XLV.

MR. STURGEON arrived that evening with all his accounts and papers. He had not come, indeed, when Lady Somers left her sister to entertain James Stanford and joined her husband in the room which he had incontinently turned into a smoking-room, and which had already acquired that prevailing odour of tobacco and whiskey from which Mr. Tredgold's house had hitherto afforded no refuge. Stella had no objection to these odours. She told her husband that she had "scuttled" in order to leave Kate alone with her visitor. "For that's what he wants, of course," she said. "And Kate will be much better married. For one thing, with your general invitations and nonsense she might take it into her head she was to stay here, which would not suit my plans at all. I can't bear a sister always in the house."

"It seems hard," said Sir Charles, "that you should take all her money and not even give her house room. I think it's a deuced hard case."

"Bosh!" said Stella; "I never took a penny of her money. Papa, I hope, poor old man, had a right to do whatever he liked with his own. She had it all her own way for seven long years. If she had been worth her salt she could have made him do anything she pleased in that time. We used to rely upon that, don't you remember? And a pretty business it would have been had we had nothing better to trust to. But he never meant to be hard upon Stella, I was always sure of that. Poor old papa! It was nice of him not to change his mind. But I can't see that Katherine's is any very hard case, for it was settled like this from the first."

"A wrong thing isn't made right because it's been settled from the very first," said Sir Charles, oracularly.

"Don't be a fool, Charlie. Perhaps you'd like me to give it all away to Kate? It is a good thing for you and your spoiled little monkey Job that I am not such an idiot as that."

"We should have expected our share had she had it," said Somers always half inaudibly into his moustache.

"I daresay. But how different was that! In the first place, she would have had it in trust for me; in the second place, we're a family and she is a single person. And then she has money of her own; and then, at the end of all, she's Kate, you know, and I——"

"You are Stella," he cried, with a big laugh. "I believe you; and, by Jove! I suppose that's the only argument after all!"

Stella took this, which seemed to be a compliment, very sedately. "Yes," she said, "I am Stella; you needn't recommend Kate's ways to me, nor mine to Kate; we've always been different, and we always will be. If she will marry this man it will save a great deal of trouble. We might make her a nice present—I shouldn't object to that. We might give her her outfit: some of my things would do quite nicely; they are as good as new and of no use to me; for certainly, whatever happens, we shall never go to that beastly place again."

Sir Charles roared forth a large laugh, overpowered by the joke, though he was not without a touch of shame. "By Jove! Stella, you are the one!" he cried.

And a short time after Mr. Sturgeon arrived. He had a great deal of business to do, a great many things to explain. Stella caught with the hereditary cleverness her father had discovered in her the involutions of Mr. Tredgold's investments, the way in which he had worked one thing by means of or even against another, and in what artful ways he had held the strings.

"Blessed if I can make head or tail of it," said Somers, reduced to partial imbecility by his effort to understand.

But Stella sat eager at the table with two red spots on her cheeks, shuffling the papers about and entering into everything.

"I should like to work it all myself, if I hadn't other things to do," she said.

"And excellently well you would do it," said the lawyer with a bow.

It was one of Stella's usual successes. She carried everything before her wherever she went. Mr. Sturgeon asked punctiliously for Miss Tredgold, but he felt that Kate was but a feeble creature before her sister, this bright being born to conquer the world.

"And now," he said, "Lady Somers, about other things."

"What things?" cried Stella. "So far as I know there are no other things."

"Oh, yes, there are other things. There are some that you will no doubt think of for the credit of your father, and some for your own. The servants, for instance, were left without any remembrance. They are old faithful servants. I have heard him say, if they were a large household to keep up, that at least he was never cheated of a penny by them."

"That's not much to say," cried Stella; "anyone who took care could ensure that."

"Your father thought it was, or he would not have repeated it so often. There was not a penny for the servants, not even for Harrison, whose care was beyond praise—and Mrs. Simmons, and the butler. It will be a very small matter to give them a hundred pounds or two to satisfy them."

"A hundred pounds!" cried Stella. "Oh, I shouldn't call that a small matter! It is quite a sum of money. And why should they want hundreds of pounds? They have had good wages, and pampered with a table as good as anything we should think of giving to ourselves. Simmons is an impertinent old woman. She's given—I mean, I've given her notice. And the butler the same. As for Harrison, to hear him you would think he was papa's physician and clergyman and everything all in one."

"He did a very great deal for him," said the lawyer. "Then another thing, Lady Somers, your uncle——"

"My uncle! I never had an uncle," cried Stella with a shriek.

"But there is such a person. He is not a very creditable relation. Still he ought not to be left to starve."

"I never heard of any uncle! Papa never spoke of anyone. He said he had no relations, except some far-off cousins. How can I tell that this is not some old imposition trumped up for the sake of getting money? Oh, I am not going to allow myself to be fleeced so easily as that!"

"It is no imposition. Bob Tredgold has been in my office for a long number of years. I knew him as I knew your father when we were boys together. The one took the right turning, the other the wrong—though who can tell what is right and what is wrong with any certainty? One has gone out of the world with great injustice, leaving a great deal of trouble behind him; the other would be made quite happy with two pounds a week till he dies."

"Two pounds a week—a hundred pounds a year!" cried Stella. "Mr. Sturgeon, I suppose you must think we are made of money. But I must assure you at once that I cannot possibly undertake at the very first outset such heavy responsibility as that."

Sir Charles said nothing, but pulled his moustache. He had no habit of making allowances or maintaining poor relations, and the demand seemed overwhelming to him too.

"These are things which concern your father's credit, Lady Somers. I think it would be worth your while to attend to them for his sake. The other is for your own. You cannot allow your sister, Miss Katherine, to go out into the world on five hundred a year while you have sixty thousand. I am a plain man and only an attorney, and you are a beautiful young lady, full, I have no doubt, of fine feelings. But I don't think, if you consider the subject, that for your own credit you can allow this singular difference in the position of two sisters to be known."

Stella was silent for a moment. She was struck dumb by the man's grave face and his importance and the confidence of his tone. She said at last, almost with a whimper, "It was none of my doing. I was not here; I could not exercise any influence," looking up at the old executor with startled eyes.

"Yes," he said, "I am aware you were far away, and your sister ought to have been the person to exercise influence. She did not, however," he added with a little impatience. "There are some people who are too good for this world."

Too ineffectual—capable of neither good nor evil! Was it the same kind of incapacity as the others were discussing in the other room?

"I've been saying that, don't you know, to my wife, about Miss Kate," said Sir Charles.

"Oh, you've been saying!" cried Stella with a quick movement of impatience. She paused again for a little, and then fixing her eyes upon Mr. Sturgeon, said with some solemnity, "You wish me then, as soon as I have got over the first wonder of it, and being so glad that papa had forgiven me, to go right in his face and upset his last will?"

The rectitude, the pathos, the high feeling that were in Stella's voice and attitude are things that no ordinary pen could describe. Her father's old executor looked at her startled. He took off his spectacles to see her more clearly, and then he put them on again. His faculties were not equal to this sudden strain upon them.

"It would not be upsetting the will," he said.

"Would it not? But I think it would. Papa says a certain thing very distinctly. You may say it is not just. Many people are turning upon me—as if I had anything to do with it!—and saying it is unjust. But papa made all his money himself, I suppose? And if he had a special way in which he wished to spend it, why shouldn't he be allowed to do that? It is not any vanity in me to say he was fondest of me, Mr. Sturgeon—everybody knew he was."

Mr. Sturgeon sat silent, revolving many things in his mind. He was one of the few people who had seen old Tredgold

after his daughter's flight; he had heard him say with the calmest countenance, and his hands on his knees, "God damn them!" and though he was an attorney and old, and had not much imagination, a shiver ran through Sturgeon's mind, if not through his body. Was it as a way of damning her that the old fellow had let all this money come to his undutiful child?

"So you see," said Stella with grave triumph, as one who feels that she has reasoned well, "I am tied up so that I cannot move. If you say, Will I upset papa's will? I answer, No, not for all the world! He says it quite plain—there is no doubt as to what he meant. He kept it by him for years and never changed it, though he was angry with me. Therefore I cannot, whom he has trusted so much and been so kind to, upset his will. Oh, no, no! If Katherine will accept a present, well, she shall have a present," cried Stella with a great air of magnanimity, "but I will do nothing that would look like flying in the face of papa."

"By Jove! she is right there, don't-ye-know," said the heavy dragoon, looking up at the man of law, with great pride in his clever wife.

"I suppose she is—in a kind of way," Mr. Sturgeon said. He was a humiliated man—he was beaten even in argument. He did not know how to answer this little sharp woman with her superficial logic. It was old Tredgold's money; if he wanted it to go in a particular way, why should his will be gainsaid? He had wished it to go to Stella, he had remorselessly cut out her sister; the quick-witted creature had the adversary at a disadvantage. Old Tredgold had not been a just or noble man. He had no character or credit to keep up. It was quite likely that he fully intended to produce this very imbroglio, and to make both his daughters unhappy. Not that Stella would make herself unhappy or disturb her composure with feeling over the subject. She was standing against the big chair covered with red velvet in which old Tredgold used to sit. Nobody cared about that chair or had any associations with it; it had been pushed out of the way

because it was so big, and the mass of its red cover threw up the figure of Stella before it with her black dress and her fair crisped hair. She was triumphant, full of energy and spirit, a princess come into her kingdom, not a new heir troubled with the responsibilities of inheritance. It would not disturb her that Katherine should have nothing, that poor old Bob Tredgold should starve. She was quite strong enough to put her foot on both and never feel a pang.

"I am perhaps going beyond my instructions," Mr. Sturgeon said. "Your sister Katherine is a proud young woman, my Lady Stella—I mean my Lady Somers; I doubt if she will receive presents even from you. Your father's will is a very wicked will. I remarked that to him when he made it first. I was thankful to believe he had felt it to be so after your ladyship ran away. Then I believed the thing would be reversed and Miss Katherine would have had all; and I knew what her intentions were in that case. It was only natural, knowing that you were two sisters, to suppose that you would probably act in some degree alike."

"Not for people who know us, Mr. Sturgeon," said Stella. "Kate and I never did anything alike all our days. I may not be as good as Kate in some things, but I am stronger than she is in being determined to stick by what is right. I would not interfere with papa's will for all the world! I should think it would bring a curse on me. I have got children of my own, and that makes me go much deeper into things than an unmarried young woman like Kate can be supposed to do. Fancy Charlie, our boy, turning on us and saying, You made mincemeat of grandpapa's will, why should I mind about yours? That is what I could not look forward to—it would make me perfectly wretched," Stella said. She stood up, every inch of her height, with her head tossed back full of matronly and motherly importance; but the force of the situation was a little broken by a muffled roar of laughter from Sir Charles, who said—

"Go it, Stella! You're going to be the death of me," under his breath.

"My husband laughs," said Lady Somers with dignity, "because our boy is a very little boy, and it strikes him as absurd; but this is precisely the moment when the mind receives its most deep impressions. I would not tamper with dear papa's will if even there was no other reason, because it would be such a fearfully bad example for my boy."

"I waive the question, I waive the question," cried Mr. Sturgeon. "I will talk it over with the other executor; but in the meantime I hope you will reconsider what you have said on the other subject. There's the servants and there is poor old Bob."

"Oh, the servants! As they're leaving, and a good rid-dance, give them fifty pounds each and be done with them," Stella said.

"And Bob Tredgold?"

"I never heard of that person; I don't believe in him. I think you have been taken in by some wretched impostor."

"Not likely," said Mr. Sturgeon. "I have known him, poor fellow, from a boy, and a more promising boy I can tell you than any other of his name. He is a poor enough wretch now. You can have him here, if you like, and judge of him for yourself."

"Stella," said Sir Charles, pulling his wife's dress.

"Oh, Charlie, let me alone with your silly suggestions. I am sure Mr. Sturgeon has been taken in. I am sure that papa——"

"Look here," said the husband, "don't be a little fool. I'm not going to stand a drunken old beast coming here saying he's my wife's relation. Settle what he wants and be done. It's not my affair? Oh, yes, some things are my affair. Settle it here, I say. Mr. Sturgeon, she's ready to settle whatever you say."

Sir Charles had his wife's wrist in his hand. She was far cleverer than he was and much more steady and pertinacious, but when she got into that grip Stella knew there was no more to be said. Thus she bought off the powers of Nemesis, had there been any chance of their being put in motion against

her; and there was no further question of setting the worst of examples to Job by upsetting his grandfather's will. Stella religiously watched over Mr. Tredgold's fortune and kept every penny of it to herself from that day.

"And do you think of building that cottage, Miss Katherine, as your father suggested?" Mr. Sturgeon asked as he rose from the dinner at which he had been entertained, Lady Somers making herself very agreeable to him and throwing a great deal of dust into his eyes. He was going back to town by the last train, and he had just risen to go away. Katherine had been as silent as Stella was gay. She had not shown well, the old lawyer was obliged to admit, in comparison with her sister, the effect no doubt of having lived all her life at Sliplin and never having seen the great world, besides that of being altogether duller, dimmer than Stella. She was a little startled when he spoke to her, and for a moment did not seem to understand what was being said.

"Oh, the cottage! I don't think I can afford it. No, Mr. Sturgeon," she said at length.

"Then I have a good opportunity of selling the bit of land for you," he said. "There is a new railway station wanted, and this is the very spot that will be most suitable. I can make an excellent bargain if you put it in my hands."

"There!" cried Stella, holding up a lively finger, "I told you! It is always Kate that has the luck among us all!"

CHAPTER XLVI.

KATHERINE scarcely heard what Stanford said to her after that astounding speech about his little child. She rose to her feet as if it had touched some sudden spring in her; though she could no more have told why than she could have told what it was that made her head giddy and her heart beat. She had a momentary sense that she had been insulted; but that too was so utterly unreasonable that she could not explain her conduct to herself by it, any more than by any other rule. She did not know how she managed to get out of the room, on what pretext, by what excuse to the astonished visitor, whose look alone she saw in her mind afterwards, startled and disturbed, with the eyelids puckered over his eyes. He had been conscious, too, that she had received a shock; but he had not been aware, any more than she was, what he had done to produce this impression upon her.

She ran upstairs to her own room, and concealed herself there in the gathering twilight, in the darkest corner, as if somebody might come to look for her. There had been a great many thoughts in that room through these long years—thoughts that, perhaps, were sometimes impatient, occasionally pathetic, conscious of the passing of her youth from her, and that there had been little in it that was like the youth of other women. To be sure, she might have married had she been so minded, which is believed to be the chief thing in a young woman's life; but that had not counted for very much in Katherine's. There had been one bit of visionary romance, only one, and such a little one! but it had sufficed to make a sort of shining, as of a dream, over her horizon. It had never come nearer than the horizon; it had been a glimmer of

colour, of light, of poetry, and the unknown. It had never been anything, she said to herself, with emphasis, putting her foot down firmly on the ground, with a faint sound of purpose and meaning—never—anything! She was the most desperate fool in the world to feel herself insulted, to feel as if he had struck her in the face when he spoke of his little child. Why should he not have a little child like any other man, and a kind wife waiting for him, amid all the brightness of a home? Why not? Why not? There was no reason in the world. The effect it produced upon her was absurd in the last degree. It was an effect of surprise, of sudden disillusion. She was not prepared for that disclosure. This was the only way in which she could account for the ridiculous impression made upon her mind by these few words.

She had so much to do accounting to herself for this, that it was not for a long time that she came to imagine what he would think of her sudden start and flight. What could he think of it? Could he think she was disappointed, that she had been building hopes upon his return? But that was one of the thoughts that tend to madness, and have to be crushed upon the threshold of the mind. She tried not to think of him at all, to get rid of the impression which he had made on her. Certainly he had not meant to insult her, certainly it was no blow in the face. There had been some foolish sort of talk before—she could not recall it to mind now—something that had nothing in the world to do with his position, or hers, or that of anyone in the world, which probably was only to pass the time; and then he had begun to speak to her about his child. How natural to speak about his child! probably with the intention of securing her as a friend for his child—she who had been a playmate of his own childhood. If she had not been so ridiculous she would have heard of the poor little thing brought from India (like little Job, but that was scarcely an endearing comparison) to be left alone among strangers. Poor little thing! probably he wanted her to be kind to it, to be a friend to it—how natural that idea was!—his own playfellow, the girl whom he had read Dante with

in those days. But why, why did he recall those days? It was that that made her feel—when he began immediately after to speak of his child—as if he had given her a blow in the face.

Katherine went down to dinner as if she were a visitor in the house. She passed the nursery door, standing wide open, with the baby making a great whiteness in the middle of the room, and Job watching like an ill-tempered little dog, ready to rush out with a snarl and bite at any passer-by whom he disliked; and her sister's door, where Stella's voice was audibly high and gay, sometimes addressing her maid, sometimes in a heightened tone her husband, in his dressing-room at the other side. They were the proprietors of the place, not Katherine. She knew that very well, and wondered at herself that she should still be here, and had made no other provision for her loneliness. She was a guest—a guest on sufferance—one who had not even been invited. Wilkam, the soldier-servant, was in possession of the hall. He opened the door for her with a respectful tolerance. She was missus's sister to William. In the drawing-room was Mr. Sturgeon, who rose as she entered from the side of the fire. He was going back by the train immediately after dinner, and was in his old-fashioned professional dress, a long black coat and large black tie. One looked for a visionary bag of papers at his feet or in his hands. His influence had a soothing effect upon Katherine; it brought her back to the practical. He told her what he had been able to do—to get gratuities for the servants, and a pension, such as it was, for poor old Bob Tredgold. "It will keep him in comfort if he can be kept off the drink," he said. All this brought her out of herself, yet at the same time increased the sense in her of two selves, one very much interested in all these inconsiderable arrangements, the other standing by looking on. "But about your affairs, Miss Katherine, not a thing could I do," Mr. Sturgeon was beginning, when happily Sir Charles came downstairs.

"So much the better; my affairs have nothing to do with

my sister," Katherine said hastily. And, indeed, it was plain neither they nor any other intrusive affairs had much to do with Stella when she came in radiant, the blackness of her dress making the whiteness of her arms and throat almost too dazzling. She came in with her head held high, with a swing and movement of her figure which embodied the supremacy she felt. She understood now her own importance, her own greatness. It was her natural position, of which she had been defrauded for some time without ever giving up her pretensions to it; but now there was no further possibility of any mistake.

As I have already related the concluding incident of this party it is unnecessary now to go through its details. But when Mr. Sturgeon had gone to his train and Sir Charles to the smoking-room (though not without an invitation to the ladies to accompany him) Stella suddenly took her sister by the waist, and drew her close. "Well?" she said, in her cheerful high tones, "have you anything to tell me, Kate?"

"To tell you, Stella? I don't know what I can tell you—you know the house as well as I do—and as you are going to have new servants——"

"Oh! if you think it is anything about the house, I doubt very much whether I shall keep up the house, it's *rococo* to such a degree—and all about it—the very gardens are *rococo*."

"It suits you very well, however," Katherine said. "All this gilding seems appropriate, like a frame to a picture."

"Do you think so?" said Stella, looking at herself in the great mirror over the mantelpiece with a certain fondness. It was nice to be able to see yourself like that wherever you turned, from head to foot. "But that is not in the least what I was thinking of," she said; "tell me about yourself. Haven't you something very particular to tell me—something about your own self?"

Katherine was surprised, yet but dimly surprised, not enough to cause her any emotion. Her heart had become as still as a stone.

"No," she said; "I have nothing particular to tell you.

I will leave The Cliff when you like—is that what you mean? I have not as yet made any plans, but as soon as you wish it——”

“Oh, as for that,” said Stella, “we shall be going ourselves. Charlie wants me to go to his horrid old place to see what can be done to it, and we shall stay in town for a little. Town is town, don’t you know, after you’ve been in India, even at the dullest time of the year. But these old wretches of servants will have to stay out their month I suppose, and if you like to stay while they’re here—of course, they think a great deal more of you than of me. It will be in order as long as they are here. After, I cannot answer for things. We may shut up the house, or we may let it. It should bring in a fine rent, with the view and all that. But I have not settled yet what I am going to do.”

“My plans then,” said Katherine, faintly smiling, “will be settled before yours, though I have not taken any step as yet.”

“That’s just what I want to know,” cried Stella, “that is what I was asking! Surely there’s nothing come between you and me, Kate, that would keep you from telling me? As for papa’s will, that was his doing, not mine. I cannot go against it, whatever anybody says—I can’t, indeed! It’s a matter of conscience with me to do whatever he wished, now he is dead. I didn’t when he was living, and that is just the reason why——” Stella shut her mouth tight, that no breath of inconsistency might ever come from it. Then once more putting her hand on Katherine’s waist, and inclining towards her: “Tell me what has happened; do tell me, Kate!”

“But nothing has happened, Stella.”

“Nothing! That’s impossible. I left you alone with him on purpose. I saw it was on his very lips, bursting to get it out; and he gave me such a look—Oh, why can’t you fade away?—which isn’t a look I’m accustomed to. And I don’t believe nothing has happened. Why, he came here for that very purpose! Do you think he wanted to see me or Charlie? He was always a person of very bad taste,” Stella said with a

laugh. "He was always your own, Kate. Come! don't bear any malice about the will or that—but tell."

"There is nothing whatever to tell. Mr. Stanford told me about his child whom he has brought home."

"Yes, that was to rouse your pity. He thought as you are one of the self-sacrificing people the idea of a baby to take care of—though it is not a baby now—it's about as old as Job—. The mother died when it was born, you know, a poor little weakly thing. Did I never tell you when I wrote? It must have gone out of my head, for I knew all about it, the wedding and everything. How odd I didn't tell you. I suppose you had thought that he had been wearing the willow for you, my dear, all this time!"

"It is not of the slightest consequence what I thought—or if I thought at all on the subject," said Katherine, with, as she felt, a little of the stiffness of dignity injured, which is always ludicrous to a looker-on.

"I'll be sworn you did," cried Stella, with a pealing laugh. "Oh, no, my dear, there's no such example now. And, Kate, you are old enough to know better—you should not be such a goose at your age. The man has done very well, he's got an excellent appointment, and they say he'll be a member of Council before he dies. Think what a thing for you with your small income! The pension alone is worth the trouble. A member of Council's widow has—why she has thousands a year! If it were only for that, you will be a very silly girl, Kate, if you send James Stanford away."

"Is it not time you joined your husband in the smoking-room, Stella? You must have a great deal to talk about. And I am going to bed."

"I don't believe a word of it," Stella cried, "you want to get rid of me and my common-sense view. That is always how it happens. People think I am pretty and so forth, but they give me no credit for common-sense. Now that's just my quality. Look here, Kate. What will you be as an unmarried woman with your income? Why, nobody! You will not be so well off as the old cats. If you and your maid can

live on it that's all; you will be of no consequence. I hear there's a doctor who was after you very furiously for a time, and would have you still if you would hold up your little finger. But James Stanford would be far better. The position is better in every way—and think of the widow's pension! why it is one of the prizes which anyone might be pleased to go in for. Kate, if you marry you may do very well yet. Mind my words—but if you're obstinate and go in for fads, and turn your back on the world, and imagine that you are going to continue a person of importance on five hundred a year——”

“I assure you, Stella, I have no such thought.”

“What then—to be nobody? Do you think you will like to be nobody, Kate, after all the respect that's been paid to you, and at the head of a large house, and carriages at your command, and all that—to drop down to be Miss Tredgold, the old maid in lodgings with one woman servant? Oh, I know you well enough for that. You will not like it, you will hate it. Marry one of them, for Heaven's sake! If you have a preference I am sure I don't object to that. But marry one of them, James Stanford for choice! or else, mark my words, Kate Tredgold, you will regret it all your life.”

Katherine got free at last, with a laugh on her lips at the solemnity of her sister's address. If Stella had only known how little her common-sense meant, or the extreme seriousness of these views with which she endeavoured to move a mind so different from her own! Lady Somers went off full of the importance of the question, to discuss it over again with her husband, whose sense of humour was greatly tickled by the suggestion that the pension which James Stanford's widow might have if he were made member of Council was an important matter to be taken into consideration, while Katherine went back again to her room, passing once more the nursery door where Job lay nervously half awake, calling out a dreary “Zat oo, fader?” as her step sounded upon the corridor. But she had no time to think of little Job in the midst of this darkness of her own life. “What does it matter to me, what does it

matter to me?" she kept saying to herself as she went along—and yet it mattered so much, it made so great a change! If she had never seen James Stanford again it would not have mattered, indeed; but thus suddenly to find out that while she had been making of him the one little rainbow in her sky—had enshrined him as something far more than any actual lover, the very image of love itself and fidelity, he had been the lover, the husband of another woman, had gone through all the circle of emotion, had a child to remind him for ever of what had been. Katherine, on her side, had nothing save the bitter sense of an illusion fled. It was not anybody's fault. The man had done nothing he had not a perfect right to do—the secret had not been kept from her by any malice or evil means—all was quite natural, simple, even touching and sad. She ought to be sorry for him, poor fellow! She was in a manner sorry for him—if only he had not come to insult her with words that could have no meaning, words repeated, which had answered before with another woman. The wrench of her whole nature turning away from the secret thing that had been so dear to her was more dreadful than any convulsion. She had cherished it in her very heart of hearts, turned to it when she was weary, consoled herself with it in the long, long endless flatness of those years that were past. And it had all been a lie; there was nothing of the kind, nothing to fall back upon, nothing to dream of. The man had not loved her, he had loved his wife, as was most just and right. And she had been a woman voluntarily deceived, a dreamer, a creature of vanity, attributing to herself a power which she had never possessed. There is no estimating the keenness of mortified pride with which a woman makes such a discovery. Her thoughts have been dwelling on him with a visionary longing which is not painful, which is sometimes happiness enough to support the structure of a life for years; but his had not been satisfied with this. the chain that held her had been nothing to him; he had turned to other consolations and exhausted them, and then came back. The woman's instinct flung him from her, as she would have flung some evil thing. She wrenched her-

self away twisting her very heart out of its socket; that which had been, being shattered for ever by this blow, could be no more.

There was, as Stella said, no common-sense at all in the argument, or proper appreciation of a position which, taking into consideration everything, inclusive of the widow's pension, was well worth any woman's while.

CHAPTER XLVII.

It is very difficult to change every circumstance of your life when a sudden resolution comes upon you all in a moment. To restless people indeed it is a comfort to be up and doing at once—but when there is no one to do anything for but yourself, and you have never done anything for yourself alone in all your life, then it is very hard to know how to begin. To resolve that this day, this very hour you will arise and go; that you will find out a new shelter, a new foundation on which, if not to build a house, yet to pitch a tent; to transfer yourself and everything that may belong to you out of the place where you have been all your life, where every one of your little possessions has its place and niche, into another cold unknown place to which neither you nor they belong—how could anything be harder than that? It was so hard that Katherine did not do it for day after day. She put it off every morning till to-morrow. You may think that, with her pride, to be an undesired visitor in her sister's house would have been insupportable to her. But she did not feel as if she had any pride. She felt that she could support anything better than the first step out into the cold, the decision where she was to go.

The consequence of this was that the Somerses, always tranquilly pursuing their own way, and put out in their reckoning by no one, were the first to make that change. Sir Charles made an expedition to his own old house of which all the Somerses were so proud, and found that it could not only be made (by the spending of sixty thousand a year in it) a very grand old house, but that even now it was in very tolerable order and could receive his family whenever the family chose

to inhabit it. When he had made this discovery he was, it was only natural, very anxious to go, to *faire valoir* as far as was possible what was very nearly his unique contribution to the family funds. There was some little delay in order that fires might be lighted and servants obtained, but it was still October when the party which had arrived from the *Aurangzib* at the beginning of the month, departed again in something of the same order, the ayah more cold, and Pearson more worried; for though the latter had Lady Somers' old *rivière* in her own possession, another *rivière* of much greater importance was now in her care, and her responsibilities instead of lessening were increased. It could scarcely be said even that Stella was more triumphant than when she arrived, the centre of all farewells and good wishes, at Tilbury Docks; for she had believed then in good fortune and success as she did now, and she had never felt herself disappointed. Sir Charles himself was the member of the party who had changed most. There was no embarrassment about him now, or doubt of that luck in which Stella was so confident. He had doubted his luck from time to time in his life, but he did so no longer. He carried down little Job on his shoulder from the nursery regions. "I say, old chap," he said, "you'll have to give up your nonsense now and be a gentleman. Take off your hat to your Aunt Kate, like a man. If you kick I'll twist one of those little legs off. Hear, lad! You're going home to Somers and you'll have to be a man."

Job had no answer to make to this astounding address; he tried to kick, but found his feet held fast in a pair of strong hands. "Me fader's little boy," he said, trying the statement which had always hitherto been so effectual.

"So you are, old chap; but you're the young master at Somers too," said the father, who had now a different meaning. Job drummed upon that very broad breast as well as he could with his little imprisoned heels, but he was not monarch of all he surveyed as before. "Good-bye, Kate," Sir Charles said. "Stay as long as ever you like, and come to Somers as soon as you will. I'm master there, and I wish you were

going to live with us for good and all—but you and your sister know your own ways best.”

“Good-bye, Charles. I shall always feel that you have been very kind.”

“Oh, kind!” he cried, “but I’m only Stella’s husband don’t you know, and I have to learn my place.”

“Good-bye, Kate,” cried Stella, coming out with all her little jingle of bracelets, buttoning her black gloves. “I am sure you will be glad to get us out of the way for a bit to get your packing done, and clear out all your cupboards and things. You’ll let me know when you decide where you’re going, and keep that old wretch Simmons in order, and don’t give her too flaming a character. You’ll be sending them all off with characters as long as my arm, as if they were a set of angels. Mind you have proper dinners, and don’t sink into tea as ladies do when they’re alone. Good-bye, dear.” Stella kissed her sister with every appearance of affection. She held her by the shoulders for a moment and looked into her eyes. “Now, Kate, no nonsense! Take the good the Gods provide you—don’t be a silly, neglecting your own interest. At your age you really ought to take a common-sense view.”

Kate stood at what had been so long her own door and watched them all going away—Pearson and the soldier in the very brougham in which Stella had driven to the yacht on the night of her elopement. That and the old landau had got shabby chiefly for want of use in these long years. The baby, now so rosy, crowded in the arms of the dark nurse, and Sir Charles held his hat in his hand till he was almost out of sight. He was the only one who had felt for her a little, who had given her an honest if ineffectual sympathy. She felt almost grateful to him as he disappeared. And now to think this strange chapter in her existence was over and could never come again! Few, very few people in the world could have gone through such an experience—to have everything taken from you, and yet to have as yet given up nothing. She seemed to herself a shadow as she stood at that familiar door. She had lived more or less naturally as her sister’s dependent

for the last week or two; the position had not galled her; in her desolation she might have gone on and on, to avoid the trouble of coming to a decision. But Stella was not one of the aimless people who are afraid of making decisions, and no doubt Stella was right. When a thing has to be done, it is better that it should be done, not kept on continually hanging over one. Stella had energy enough to make up half a dozen people's minds for them. "Get us out of the way for a bit to get your packing done"—these were the words of the lease on which Katherine held this house, very succinctly set down.

This was a curious interval which was just over, in many ways. Katherine's relation to Stella had changed strangely; it was the younger sister now who was the prudent chaperon, looking after the other's interests—and other relationships had changed too. The sight of James Stanford coming and going, who was constantly asked to dinner and as constantly thrown in her way, but whom Katherine, put on her mettle, had become as clever to avoid as Stella was to throw them together, was the most anxious experience. It had done her good to see him so often without seeing him, so to speak. It made her aware of various things which she had not remarked in him before. Altogether this little episode in life had enlarged her horizon. She had found out many things—or, rather, she had found out the insignificance of many things that had bulked large in her vision before. She went up and down the house and it felt empty, as it never had felt in the old time when there was nobody in it. It seemed to her that it had never been empty till now, when the children, though they were not winning children, and Stella, though she was so far from being a perfect person, had gone. There was no sound or meaning left in it; it was an echoing and empty place. It was *rococo*, as Stella said; a place made to display wealth, with no real beauty in it. It had never been a home, as other people know homes. And now all the faint recollections which had hung about it of her own girlhood and of Stella's were somehow obliterated. Old Mr. Tredgold and his

daughters were swept away. It was a house belonging to the Somerses, who had just come back from India; it looked dreadfully forlorn and empty now they had gone away, and bare also—a place that would be sold or let in all probability to the first comer. Katherine shivered at the disorder of all the rooms upstairs, with their doors widely opened and all the signs of departure about. The household would always be careless, perhaps, under Stella's sway. There was the look of a desecrated place, of a house in which nothing more could be private, nothing sacred, in the air of its emptiness, with all those doors flung open to the wall.

She was called downstairs again, however, and had no time to indulge these fancies—and glancing out at a window saw the familiar Midge standing before the door; the voices of the ladies talking both together were audible before she had reached the stairs.

"Gone away? Yes, Harrison, we met them all—quite a procession—as we came driving up; and did you see that dear baby, Ruth Mildmay, kissing its little fat hand?"

"I never thought they would make much of a stay," said Miss Mildmay; "didn't suit, you may be sure; and mark my words, Jane Shanks——"

"How's Miss Katherine? Miss Katherine, poor dear, must feel quite dull left alone by herself," said Mrs. Shanks, not waiting to waste any words.

"I should have felt duller the other way," said the other voice, audibly moving into the drawing-room. Then Katherine was received by one after another once more in a long embrace.

"You dear!" Mrs. Shanks said—and Miss Mildmay held her by the shoulders as if to impart a firmness which she felt to be wanting.

"Now, Katherine, here you are on your own footing at last."

"Am I? It doesn't feel like a very solid footing," said Katherine with a faint laugh.

"I never thought," said Mrs. Shanks, "that Stella would stay."

"It is I that have been telling you all the time, Jane Shanks, that she would not stay. Why should she stay among all the people who know exactly how she's got it and everything about it? And the shameful behaviour——"

"Now," said Katherine, "there must not be a word against Stella. Don't you know Stella is Stella, whatever happens? And there is no shameful behaviour. If she had tried to force half her fortune upon me, do you think I should have taken it? You know better than that, whatever you say."

"Look here—this is what I call shameful behaviour," cried Miss Mildmay, with a wave of her hand.

The gilded drawing-room with all its finery was turned upside down, the curiosities carried off—some of them to be sold, some of them, that met with Stella's approval, to Somers. The screen with which Katherine had once made a corner for herself in the big room lay on the floor half covered with sheets of paper, being packed; a number of the pictures had been taken from the walls. The room, which required to be very well kept and cared for to have its due effect, was squalid and miserable, like a beggar attired in robes of faded finery. Katherine had not observed the havoc that had been wrought. She looked round, unconsciously following the movement of Miss Mildmay's hand, and this sudden shock did what nothing had done yet. It was sudden and unlooked for, and struck like a blow. She fell into a sudden outburst of tears.

"This is what I call shameful behaviour," Miss Mildmay said again, "and Katherine, my poor child, I cannot bear, for one, that you should be called on to live in the middle of this for a single day."

"Oh, what does it matter?" cried Katherine, with a laugh that was half hysterical, through her tears. "Why should it be kept up when, perhaps, they are not coming back to it? And why shouldn't they get the advantage of things which are pretty things and are their own? I might have thought that screen was mine—for I had grown fond of it—and carried it away with my things, which clearly I should have had no right to do, had not Stella seen to it. Stella, you know,

is a very clever girl—she always was, but more than ever," she said, the laugh getting the mastery. It certainly was very quick, very smart as Lady Somers to take the first step, which Katherine certainly never would have had decision enough to do.

"You ought to be up with her in another way," said Miss Mildmay. "Katherine, there's a very important affair, we all know, waiting for you to decide."

"And oh, my dear, how can you hesitate?" said Mrs. Shanks, taking her hand.

"It is quite easy to know why she hesitates. When a girl marries at twenty, as you did, Jane Shanks, it's plain sailing—two young fools together and not a thought between them. But I know Katherine's mind. I've known James Stanford, man and boy, the last twenty years. He's not a Solomon, but as men go he's a good sort of man."

"Oh, Ruth Mildmay, that's poor praise! You should see him with that poor little boy of his. It's beautiful!" cried Mrs. Shanks with tears in her eyes.

"You've spoilt it all, you——" Miss Mildmay said in a fierce whisper in her friend's ear.

"Why should I have spoilt it all? Katherine has excellent sense, we all know; the poor man married—men always do: how can they help it, poor creatures?—but as little harm was done as could be done, for she died so very soon, poor young thing."

Katherine by this time was perfectly serene and smiling—too smiling and too serene.

"Katherine," said Miss Mildmay, "if you hear the one side you should hear the other. This poor fellow, James Stanford, came to Jane Shanks and me before he went back to India the last time. He had met you on the train or somewhere. He said he must see you whatever happened. I told Jane Shanks at the time she was meddling with other people's happiness."

"You were as bad as me, Ruth Mildmay," murmured the other abashed.